

# *Conversations across the Food System*

*A Report on Food, Agriculture and the  
People of Southeast Oregon  
2009*



**Southeast Oregon Regional Food Bank**

In cooperation with Oregon Food Bank and  
Resource Assistance for Rural Environments

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

The United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, yet accessing enough healthy, fresh food to meet basic nutritional needs is a critical issue faced by millions of Americans. There are a number of reasons for food insecurity in the United States, the primary causes being lack of employment opportunities, low wages and increases in the cost of living, energy and health care. But to truly understand food insecurity, one must recognize the vital role the structure of food system plays. Over the last 50 years our food system has become increasingly global in its extent; leading to the industrialization and consolidation of agriculture and the decline of small, embedded local farms, ranches and food systems. This leaves Americans vulnerable to forces beyond their control. The loss of vibrant, local food systems and the day-to-day reality of people's inability to afford food have a significant impact on food security throughout the country.

Southeast Oregon faces many unique challenges. Harney and Malheur Counties are the two largest counties in the state; dominated by a harsh and varying climate, isolated mountains and communities, great distances and few people. The region struggles with some of the highest poverty rates in the state of Oregon, with both children and elderly being particularly vulnerable groups. Outside of the population centers of the Burns-Hines area in Harney County and Nyssa, Ontario and Vale in Malheur County, most people live far from grocery stores or food pantries. This isolation and the lack of a local food system infrastructure paired with persistent poverty and unemployment that plague the region have made food insecurity a critical issue faced by many people throughout southeast Oregon.

## **Community Food Security**

Few people know where their food comes from, the conditions under which it is grown and raised or how it gets to the supermarket shelves. While the disconnect between producers and consumers continues to grow, many people across the country are working towards creative, localized solutions to the current problems with our food system. This community food security movement is working towards building strong and resilient food systems through innovative and diverse community partnerships.

Community food security is defined as a “condition in which all community members obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (Pothukuchi et al., 2002). A food system can be broadly described as all of the processes involved with feeding people. It includes growing, harvesting, processing, distributing, accessing, consuming and disposing of food. These processes, in addition to the social and cultural characteristics of a community and relevant government policies, define a food system.

Food security exists when all people have physical, social and economic access at all times to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life via non-emergency sources. It also means that food is produced, processed and distributed in ways that respect and protect the environment and workers who produce it.

## **Community Food Assessment**

To overcome the narrow scope of conventional food security work, the Community Food Assessment (CFA) has emerged as a research method to provide a more holistic and comprehensive approach to understanding and improving food security at a local or regional level. A Community Food Assessment is defined as “a collaborative and participatory process that systematically examines a broad range of community food

issues and assets, so as to inform change actions to make the community more food secure” (Pothukuchi et al. 2002).

A CFA tells the story of what is happening with food in a community using varied and diverse methods. It is a powerful tool to explore a range of food system issues, to provide opportunities for broad community involvement and to create positive, lasting change. A CFA can help highlight the connections between the various sectors of a food system including production, processing, distribution, storage, consumption and disposal.

*Conversations across the Food System* begins to tell the story of the journey food takes from seed to plate in the region. It is not just identifying what we eat; understanding how we grow, raise, process, distribute, access and recycle food is also important. This research intends to help us to better understand the current food system in Harney and Malheur Counties by identifying the existing strengths, weaknesses and future needs. This report will be used to bring together diverse stakeholders from throughout the region to initiate a dialogue around food-related issues and to begin work on developing potential solutions for a more food secure region.



# CHAPTER 2

## Conversations across the Food System

From October 2008 to July 2009 interviews were conducted with targeted individuals throughout southeast Oregon and several communities in southwest Idaho. Additionally, six focus groups were conducted in Malheur County in the communities of Jordan Valley, Nyssa, Ontario and Vale. The information gathered from these interviews and focus groups is organized and analyzed in this section, revealing many strengths and weaknesses in the regional food system.

This research was designed to gather unique perspectives and insights from individuals across the food system. Our goal was to answer the question, “is food available, accessible and affordable?” The solutions offered in this report are built upon themes that emerged from that process.

### **Introduction**

Southeast Oregon is deeply rooted in its agricultural history. Many of the first white settlers to the region were ranchers. Over the years agriculture continued to grow in importance and today it is the second largest employment sector in both Harney and Malheur Counties. Yet despite this rich history, many producers throughout the region struggle to be profitable as they are vulnerable to policies and global market forces beyond their control. Furthermore, poverty, unemployment and food insecurity continue to plague the region.

While these issues are a critical piece of this report, it is also important to highlight success stories and to focus on the existing assets and strengths. In advocating for the rebuilding of the local food system it is important to examine the existing food system. Many critical infrastructure pieces already exist in the region and it is important to build

upon these. Using these assets and strengths to maintain momentum can help create a food system that benefits and respects all people and parts of the system.

### **Producers Speak Up**

“Without our agricultural economy we would be nothing.”  
Dan Joyce, Malheur County Judge

Farming and ranching are fundamentally important to the economic, social and cultural fabric of southeast Oregon. Several targeted interviews and numerous informal conversations were had with gardeners, farmers and ranchers. The size of the gardens, farms and ranches ranged from thousands of acres to small, backyard gardens.

The majority of ranchers interviewed identified the lack of local USDA-inspected processing facilities as a critical problem. Most ranchers in the region ship their cattle to processing plants in Prineville, Oregon, Nampa, Idaho or Pasco, Washington. All of these facilities are far from the ranch, affecting both the cost of production and quality of the product.

On the other hand, farmers in Malheur County have good access to processors and storage facilities. Yet farmers that grow commodity crops are vulnerable to the unpredictability of the commodity markets. The owner of an onion packing shed shared his perspective on the last decade of onion farming in the region saying there has been “over production for the last ten years; three out of ten years were disastrous and two years were good.” An onion grower voiced his concern that the current system is not working, as some years the cost of production is higher than the price paid for the crop. He voiced his frustration of being at the mercy of the market, yet admitted he does not know what an alternative would look like.

While many of the crops grown in the region are commodities, there are numerous farmers

“We cut out the middle man and enjoy dealing with the public.”  
Local small-scale farmer

that grow specialty crops, oftentimes on a smaller scale. Some of these growers sell directly to consumers, restaurants and grocery stores. Small-scale growers have also set up farm stands and signs in front of their homes advertising fruit, vegetables and eggs for sale. These direct-marketing ventures have proved successful for many growers. Several of them explained direct sales require more work, but described it as more enjoyable and profitable, and beneficial to have direct control of their product and price. Interestingly, three of the small-scale producers interviewed were hesitant to share too much information because they are worried about competition and want to protect their niche.

### **Retailers Reach Out**

Southeast Oregon has several independent grocers that feature local products, primarily seasonal fruit and vegetables. Although this is promising, many consumers interviewed still shop at the large chain supermarkets because of lower prices.

<p>“Local growers are independent businesses and I feel their pain and glory. Out of respect of what they’re doing, I do the same.” Logan Hamilton, independent grocery store owner</p>
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It is much more difficult, and oftentimes impossible, for local growers to sell their products to the chain supermarkets. Even the independent grocers have issues with featuring locally grown and produced products. Interviews with grocery store owners and produce managers revealed the biggest barriers to featuring local products are quantity, quality, consistency and safety.

Building relationships with local grower leaves grocers much more vulnerable to inconsistencies than depending on the industrial food system. Barring a major catastrophe, an order placed with a wholesaler assures the delivery time and date. Small, local growers can have a bad year or lose their entire crop in one day, yet wholesalers can assure a crop because they have contracts with hundreds, if not thousands, of growers throughout the country and world.

While retailers acknowledge that quality in the form of freshness, taste and nutritional value can be superior from small, local growers, consumers may not agree. Ultimately, grocers must carry products that consumers will buy. Many consumers believe that appearance is representative of quality and taste. Local fruit and produce is not as uniform as the produce that comes from the industrial food system.

With the increase in food borne contaminations nationally and globally, there has been a heightened public awareness concerning food safety. The Food Safety Enhancement Act of 2009, recently passed in the U.S. House of Representatives, attempts to address safety issues in our food system, but it may be detrimental to small farms and local food systems. These contaminations have originated in the industrial food system, yet in the rush to assure food safety this legislation has the potential to undermine small farmers and local food systems. These issues have not originated with small processors or direct market growers, yet this is a serious issue that retailers confront when buying directly from local growers.

### **The Consumer and Those At-Risk**

<p>“It used to be that around here there was work. If you didn’t have a job in the summer, you didn’t want one. Now, even if you’re out looking for a job, and you go to the sheds, you’re in a line with 50 other people, just waiting.” Nyssa Food Pantry focus group participant</p>
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In every community visited, people talked about the lack of jobs and the lack of living wage jobs as the most serious issue they face. There was also much discussion about the historical importance of employment in the agricultural sector and the unfortunate decline in those opportunities over time. As one resident put it, “We used to go out there and weed onions for 10 hours a day. Now you don’t see it. Now you see tractors going back and forth, spraying, killing the weeds.”

Many of the jobs held by focus group participants are in service industries and do not pay a livable wage.

This leaves many families facing the tough decision of what bill will go unpaid each month or what need will have to go unfulfilled. Focus group participants

were forthcoming with stories about frequent sacrifice. Health care insurance, prescription drugs and food are items that are consistently sacrificed by people throughout the region.

“We’re retired. We wouldn’t make it if we had to have jobs here.”

Jordan Valley Food Pantry focus group participant

“We live within our means; we just get by. We’ve had to cut back in the last year and really budget.”

Gleaners focus group participant

Going without food is a serious issue many people throughout the region face. In the rural communities many people plan bi-monthly or monthly trips into the larger population centers to do their grocery shopping because they do not have access to food in their town or the food that is available is very expensive. One such town is Jordan Valley. It does not have a grocery store and the only choices are a convenience store or small store that primarily carries staples and accepts only cash or check. A surprising fact uncovered was that many people living in towns with grocery stores drive to other communities to buy their groceries because of the cheaper prices. Many people in Nyssa and Vale drive into Ontario and people throughout the region drive to Caldwell, Nampa or Boise, Idaho to save money. Even more surprising, was the drive the owners of a small store in Fields, Oregon make every month to buy supplies in Bend, Oregon, a 468 mile round-trip.

Isolation is a way of life for many people in southeast Oregon. What is most concerning about this isolation is most of these communities currently do not have the capacity to grow their own food nor do they have a grocery store. By definition, each of these communities are food insecure, making the people that live in them food

“We’re not considered rural, we’re considered isolated.

The western part of the state, they don’t want to claim us.

Idaho don’t want to claim us.

So we’re on our own. And it’s been that way ever since I’ve been here.”

Jordan Valley Food Pantry focus group participant

insecure. While many rural families are more prepared than people in urban areas, they are also much more vulnerable to forces beyond their control such as a rise in gas prices or a natural disaster like a winter storm that makes roads impassable for a long period of time.

Many of the people that shared their stories talked about the importance of growing their own food. While not all of them have gardens, gardening was identified as an important piece of individual food security. The reasons given for not gardening include the lack of gardening knowledge, lack of resources, high cost of city water, health issues, lack of space or landlords not allowing gardens.

### **Advocates' Insights**

“It’s been bad here for a long, long time. This is not an economically vibrant place and so people get defeated, they get used to it and they get into the mentality that this is the way it always is and it’s always going to be. They get caught in that cycle.”

Pastor Frank Moloney, First Christian Church

The lack of employment was echoed by advocates as the main cause of food insecurity in southeast Oregon. Advocates had many stories to share about people sacrificing health care, rent, utilities and food on a monthly basis because they either do not have jobs or the jobs they have do not pay a livable wage. The type of employment in the region is limited and there are few opportunities for people in all sectors of the economy.

“Those that have a higher education are not coming back because there is nothing to come back for.”

Angie Uptmor, Malheur County  
Commission on Children and Families

The social service and hunger advocates interviewed all stressed the importance of emergency food supplies. Many echoed the sentiment that most people that access emergency food are in an emergency situation, meaning their income does not cover all their living expenses and needs in a month. Many people face the reality of choosing to forego essentials or not pay bills each month. The food bank and food pantries ensure

people will not go without food for the month. Emergency food also frees up money so low income families can pay their bills.

And while there were stories of abuse of the system, by and large they were identified as exceptions, not the rule.

“I come across a constant struggle of not making enough money to meet the bottom line.”

Pastor Frank Moloney, First Christian Church

The lack of awareness, knowledge and interest in local food was another issue highlighted in interviews with social service and hunger advocates. Many people do not know where their food comes from or understand the opportunities and advantages of a more localized food system. Not consciously thinking about food issues and not understanding the connections between individual and community food security is the norm, not the exception, in southeast Oregon.

The lack of interest in local food may be tied to the lack of opportunities to access local food. Except for a few farm stands and emerging farmers’ markets, access to fresh food is primarily in grocery stores. Of the farm stands in the region, many of them are in Idaho. The most widely known and accessed farm stand is eight miles from the closest Oregon community and not on a public transportation route.

The disconnect that exists between food system sectors was another issue raised and confirmed by interviews with people across the food spectrum. There is a lack of communication between different sectors. Many people within the agricultural community and food economy do not approach or view the food system as an interconnected system. If we are to increase opportunities in agriculture and create a more food secure region, farmers, rancher, processors, distributors, retailers, advocates and consumers need to communicate with each other and work together around these issues.

## **Food System Assets**

There is a strong agricultural economy in southeast Oregon. Many natural and human forces converge to make this region important. These regional assets and strengths provide the foundation and opportunities to increase food security throughout the region.

The climate in Malheur County is favorable for growing fruits and vegetables. The hot, dry summers provide excellent conditions for growing a great variety of crops including cherries, peaches, onions, melons, corn, tomatoes and numerous others. Additionally, the damming of the Owyhee River created an extensive irrigation system that made the region an important vegetable growing region. This enormous public investment makes 118,000 acres of Malheur County and neighboring Idaho highly productive farm land (U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 2009).

In general, Harney County has a harsher climate and lesser access to irrigation than Malheur County, although the Drewsey and Diamond Valleys are two areas in the county that have favorable conditions for growing fruits and vegetables. There is also geothermal activity that creates microclimates well suited for vegetable and fruit production. A Harney County Farmers' Market vendor has one such operation, growing over five acres of fruit and vegetable on ground that is heated by underground geothermal activity. At one time there was a large tomato greenhouse operation that was powered by geothermal energy near Crane, Oregon that couldn't keep up with local demand for fresh vegetables. Several years ago it was bought out by an Idaho businessman that tore out the greenhouse structures and moved them to Parma, Idaho (Figure 5.1)

Processing is a strong sector of the agricultural economy. There are many large vegetable processors in the region including Chiquita, Seneca and Ore-Ida/Heinz. One of the less visible assets in the processing sector is HomeGrown Poultry, a small poultry and rabbit processing plant in New Plymouth, Idaho. Few people know of its existence, yet this fall it will become a USDA inspected facility, opening up a market for producers in Oregon



as well as Idaho. The real value in this asset is that it does not exclude small scale producers; HomeGrown Poultry will process as few as one bird or rabbit at a time.



FIGURE 5.1 What remains of once successful geothermal-powered greenhouses near Crane, Oregon. (Photo: Katie Weaver, 2009)

In recent years several farmers' markets have been sprung up in southeast Oregon. Farmers' markets play an important role in the local food system because they provide opportunities to backyard gardeners, small-scale farmers and entrepreneurial ventures. They are an outlet for producers to connect with consumers, see greater income and increase awareness in the community around local food and food security. They can also be an economic development tool, bringing in consumers that oftentimes also shop at local businesses. By selling products directly to the consumer, producers set their own price and retain most or all of the profit. Additionally, farmers' markets are creating more access to fresh fruit, vegetables, meats and value-added products in a region that is greatly underserved by such outlets.

Community gardens are another recent addition to the local food system. There has been an increased interest in community gardening and several communities now have or are in the process of planning community gardens. Ontario's garden is a communally run garden with the goal of increasing food security in the region (Figure 5.2). It provides opportunities to share gardening knowledge and resources and to educate those interested in learning skills for home gardening. Half of the garden's harvest goes to local agencies that supply emergency food to the community, increasing the amount of fresh, healthy, local food available in area food banks and pantries. This effort, and others like it, is important in providing an environment where people who are unable to garden at home or uncertain on how to begin gardening can learn the skills to become more self-sufficient.



FIGURE 5.2 Four Rivers Community Garden in Ontario, Oregon.

(Photo: Katie Weaver, 2009)

Another innovative community-based project that is being discussed in Vale is a geothermal-powered community kitchen. Several people interviewed in the last ten months expressed interest in processing and value-added ventures, but lacked access to a commercial kitchen. If this project were to get off the ground, it could provide many new

entrepreneurial opportunities for people throughout the region. As demand for local products increases, this project and other community-based projects will play an important role in increasing food security throughout the region.

### **Opportunities in the Food System**

At the Community Food Forum in September 2009 over seventy people from across the region gathered to take an in-depth look at the region's food system and agricultural economy. The strengths and weaknesses identified by the Community Food Assessment were explored and work groups developed recommendations and prioritized action steps.

The recommendations outlined in this report are issued with the hope that they will generate a dialogue about the future of food and agriculture in southeast Oregon and mobilize the community to work towards a more food secure region. The most significant issue that was revealed by the Community Food Assessment was the need for increased public awareness and dialogue around food and agriculture-related issues. In addition, each of the work groups at the Forum identified the need for a group to coalesce around this work and begin implementing the action steps outlined below.

#### **Recommendation 1: Create an action-oriented, multi-stakeholder coalition that addresses individual and community food security and the needs of the agricultural community.**

1. Review the recommendations of the Community Food Assessment.
2. Identify additional assessment needs.
3. Identify and engage community partners (e.g. producers, non-profit organizations, public agencies, business community, agricultural community) to implement specific action steps or projects.

#### **Recommendation 2: Increase public awareness and education of food and agriculture-related issues and opportunities.**

1. Develop a series of events that highlight local food and agriculture (e.g. on-farm tasting tours, progressive dinners, Farm-to-School events).

2. Create an asset map of the local food system.
3. Develop a marketing campaign that highlights local success stories; encourage retailers to highlight local producers and products.
4. Develop and distribute a local food guide.

**Recommendation 3: Create connections that build a food system that is supported by and benefits local producers, processors, retailers and consumers.**

1. Inventory producers, retail establishments, direct marketers and supporting agencies to identify those interested in selling food locally or featuring locally produced foods.
2. Advocate for rules and regulations that support and promote the production, distribution and consumption of local foods with local, state and federal agencies.
3. Assist in the creation of direct relationships between producers and retailers (e.g. Farm to Restaurant Collaborative, cooperative marketing).

**Recommendation 4: Increase and maintain access to a stable food supply in underserved areas, particularly in Harney County.**

1. Identify potential food pantry hosts and establish food pantries in communities not currently served.
2. Develop and distribute outreach materials to food insecure populations about food assistance programs.
3. Assure Women, Infant and Children (WIC) Nutrition Program and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) access in rural communities.

**Recommendation 5: Increase access to healthy, fresh, locally-grown food throughout the region, particularly in rural communities and food insecure populations.**

1. Establish WIC voucher, senior voucher and SNAP access at all area farmers' markets and farm stands.
2. Increase the amount of fresh food in emergency food programs.
3. Promote participation in programs that address nutrition and self-reliance.

**Recommendation 6: Support existing community-based food projects and encourage the development of new projects.**

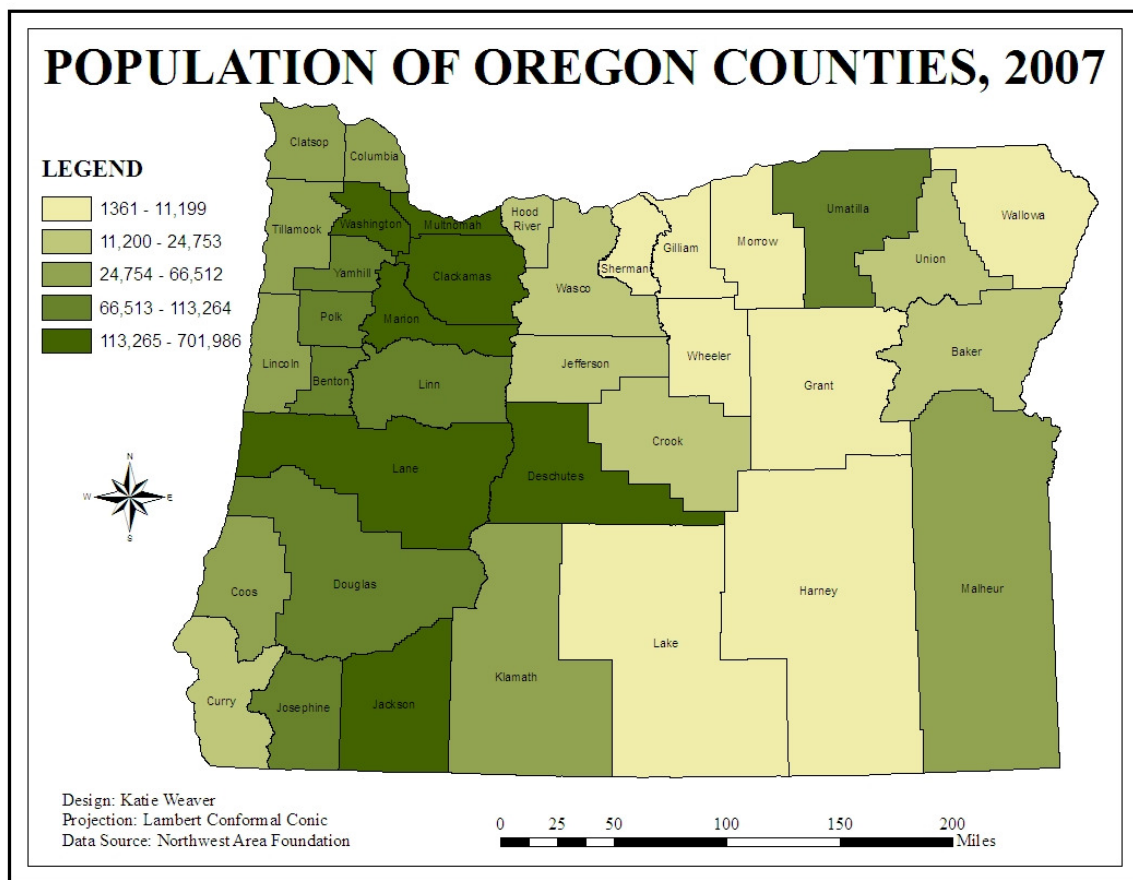
1. Promote the creation of farmers' market and farm direct sales.
2. Promote the creation of community kitchens processing, meals and events.
3. Provide support for producers and entrepreneurs in value-added ventures.
4. Promote the creation of community gardens.

# CHAPTER 3

## The People of Southeast Oregon

### Demographics

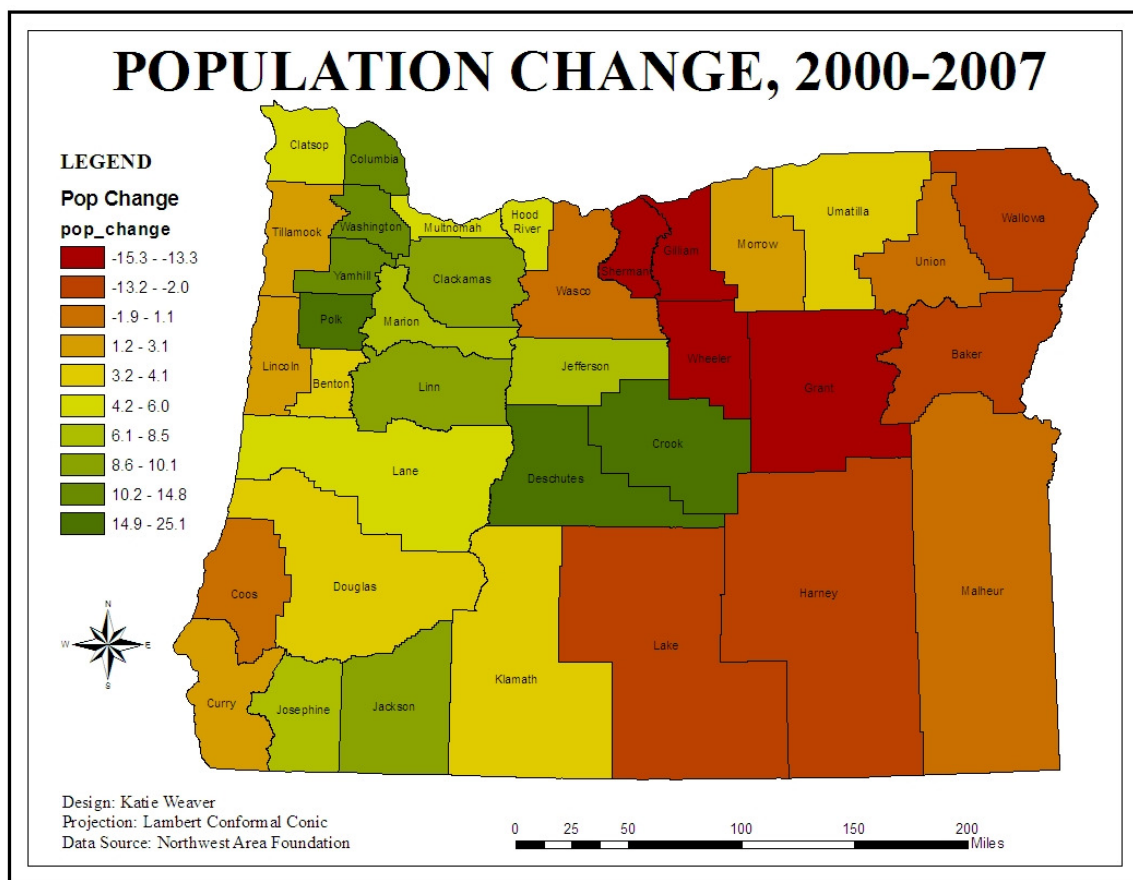
The population of the state of Oregon was 3,747,455 in 2007. Much of that population is centered in the western half of the state, along the Cascades and in the Willamette Valley (MAP 3.1). At that time the median age of Oregonians was 39. Harney County was the ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> in population out of Oregon's thirty-six counties. It had a population of 6,767 and median age of 45. Malheur County was ranked 28<sup>th</sup> in population statewide. In eastern Oregon it is the second most populous county, after Umatilla County. It had a population of 31,135 and a median age of 36 years (Northwest Area Foundation, 2007).



MAP 3.1 Total population in 2007 (Northwest Area Foundation).



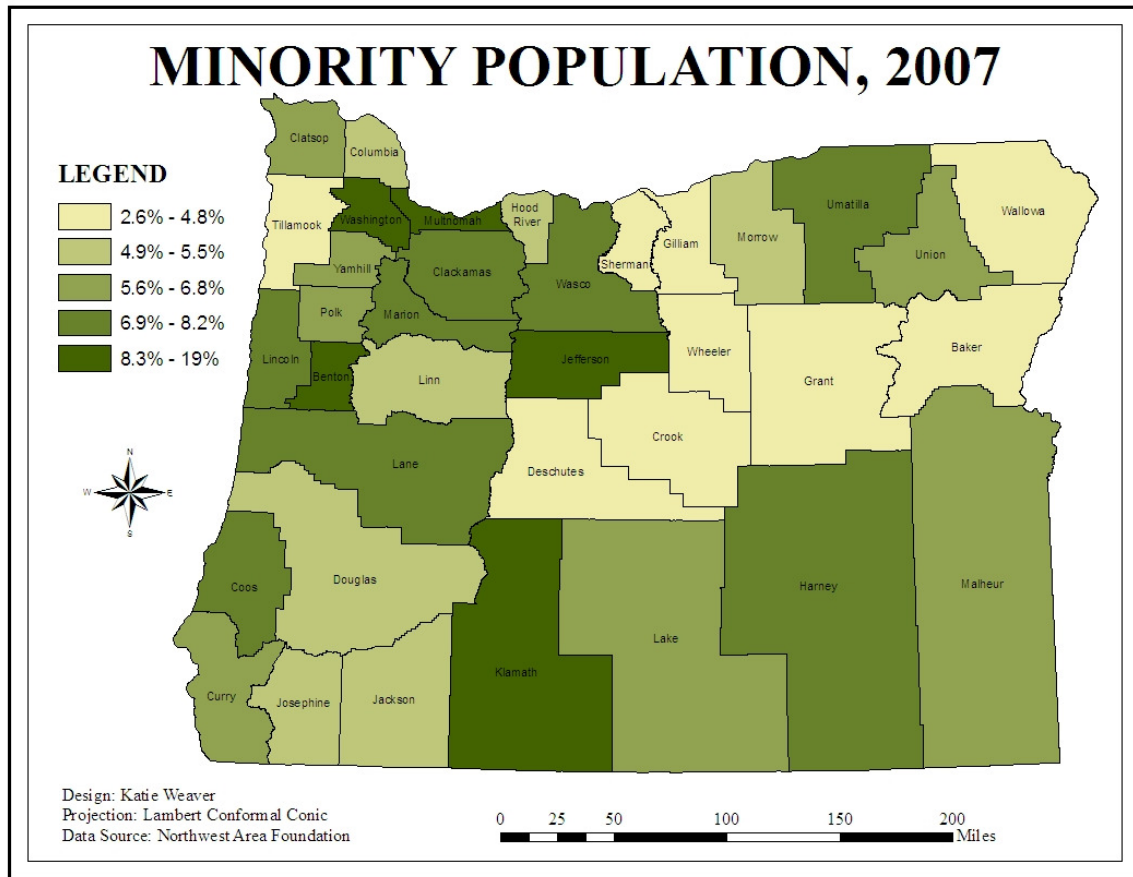
The state of Oregon's population grew by 8.7% from 2000-2007 (MAP 3.2). As the map illustrates, the counties with the highest growth were primarily in the Willamette Valley and along the length of the Cascades. Every county that experienced negative population growth rates is east of the Cascades. Except for Morrow, Umatilla and Union counties, every county in eastern Oregon lost population between 2000 and 2007. Harney and Malheur Counties lost -12.4% and -1.5% of their population, respectively (Northwest Area Foundation, 2007, U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).



MAP 3.2 Change in total population from 2000-2007 (Northwest Area Foundation).

In 2007, 90.3% of the total population of the state of Oregon was white. Minorities made up 9.7% of the total population. Asian and Pacific Islander were the largest minority population group at 3.9% (MAP 3.3). Both Harney and Malheur Counties had a smaller percentage of minority populations than the state as a whole. Harney County had an 8.0% minority population, with American Indian or Alaska Native being the largest

minority group at 4.9%. Malheur County had a 6.5% minority population, of which the largest group was Asian and Pacific Islander at 2.2% (Northwest Area Foundation, 2007).

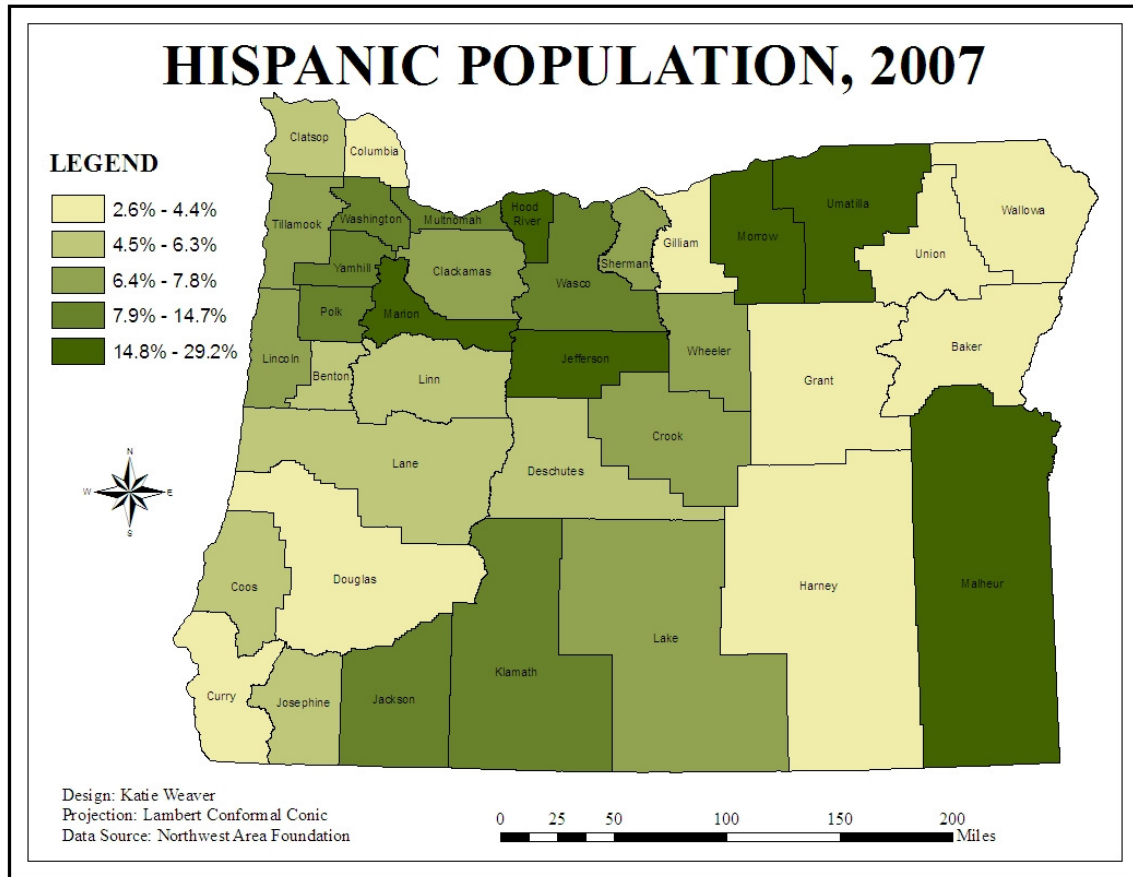


MAP 3.3 Minority population in 2007 (Northwest Area Foundation).

In 2007, 10.6% of the total population of the state of Oregon was of Hispanic origin<sup>1</sup> (MAP 3.4). Eastern Oregon had six counties with low Hispanic populations, all below 4.5%. Harney County had a 4.4% Hispanic population, the eighth lowest in the state. Interestingly, eastern Oregon also had the two counties with highest Hispanic population in the state. Morrow County was the highest at 29.2%, followed by Malheur County with 27.7% of its population Hispanic (Northwest Area Foundation, 2007).

<sup>1</sup> “Origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States. People who identify their origin as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino may be of any race” (U.S. Census Bureau).

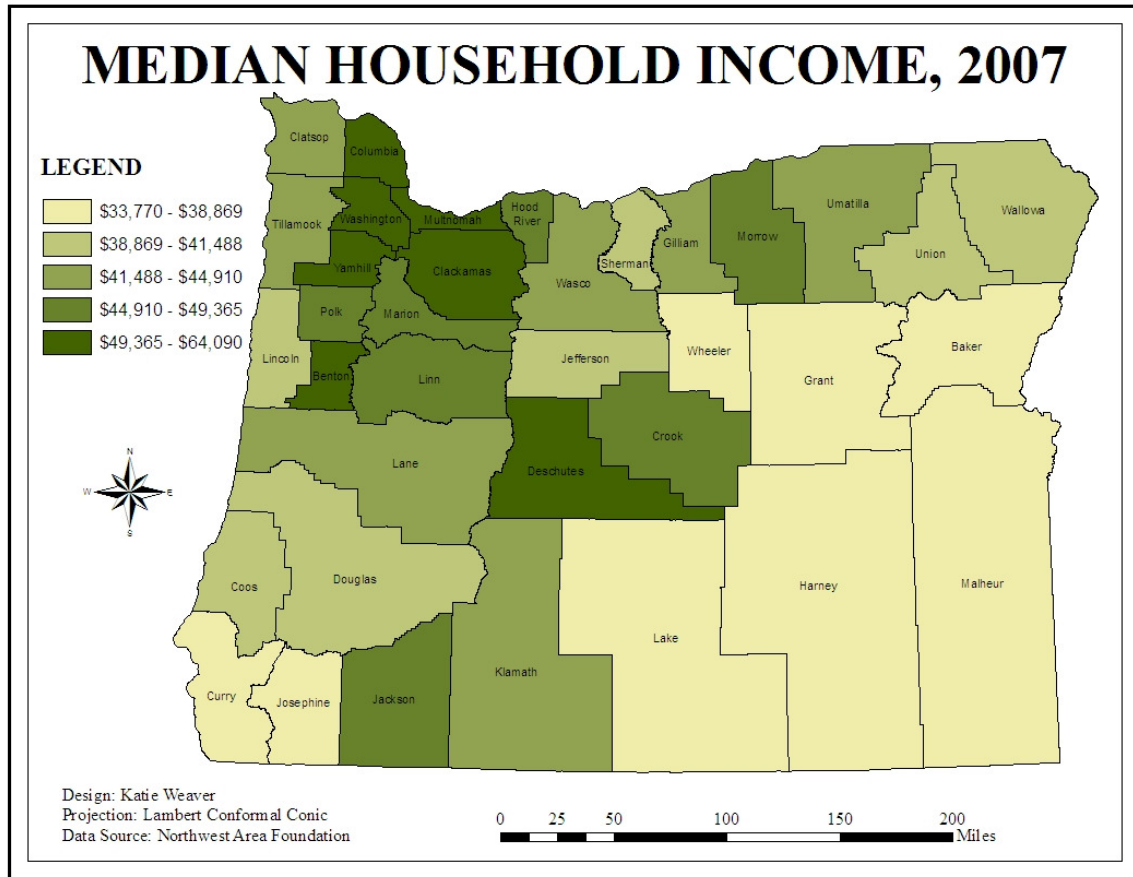




MAP 3.4 Hispanic population in 2007 (Northwest Area Foundation).

## Income and Employment

The state of Oregon had a median household income of \$50,606 in 2007 (MAP 3.5). Statewide, this indicator presents a significant trend. The seven counties with the highest median household income, all over \$50,000, are in the western half of the state; six are located in the Willamette Valley and the other, Deschutes County, is home to Bend. The nine counties with the lowest median household income, all less than \$40,000, are in southwest and eastern Oregon, specifically the southeast corner of the state. Median household income in Harney County was the seventh lowest in Oregon at \$37,432. Malheur County had the third lowest median household income in the state, after Wheeler and Grant Counties, at \$36,100 (Northwest Area Foundation, 2007).

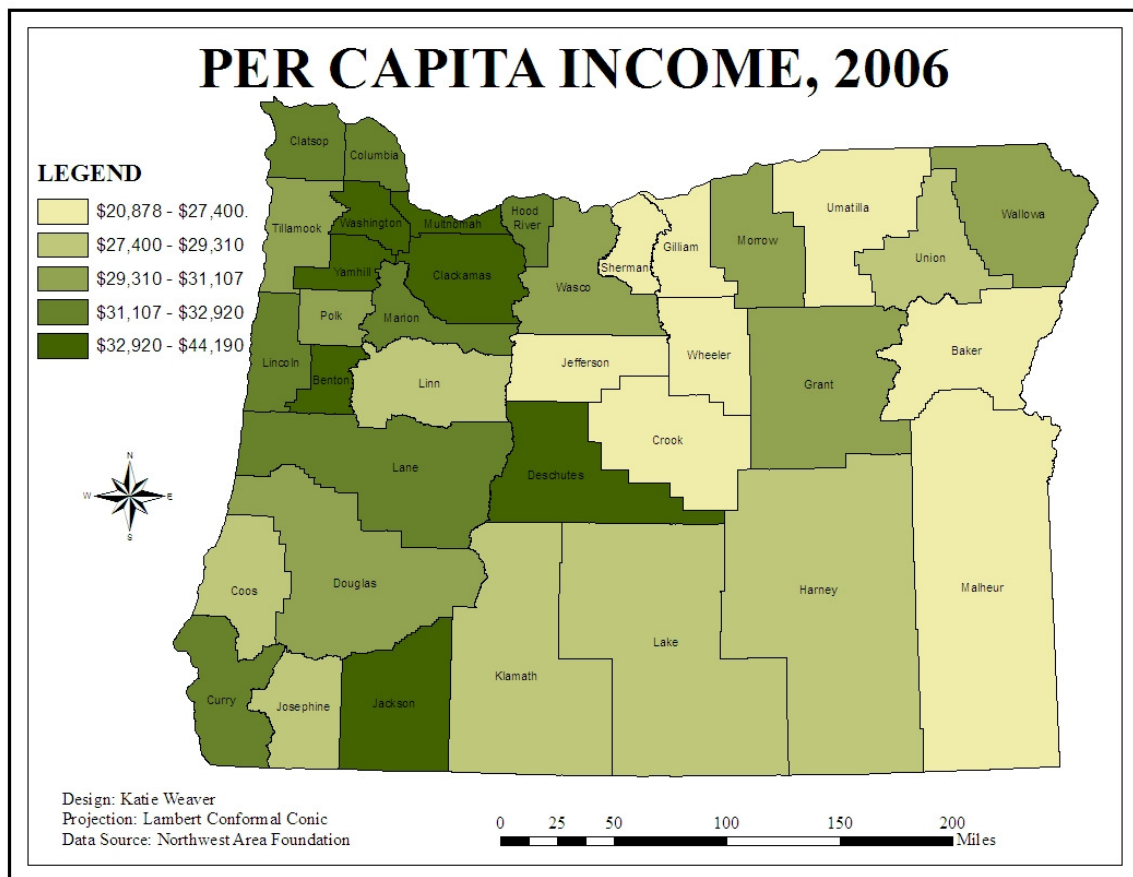


MAP 3.5 Median household income in 2007 (Northwest Area Foundation).

Per capita income in 2006 for the state of Oregon was \$35,562 (MAP 3.6). Statewide, this indicator generally followed the same trend as median household income. The ten counties with the highest per capita incomes, all over \$32,000, are in the western half of the state. Eight of these counties are in the Willamette Valley. The nine counties that had a per capita income less than \$28,000 all lie east of the Cascades. Harney County had a per capita income of \$26,358 in 2006, the eleventh lowest in the state. Malheur County, after Sherman County, had the second lowest per capita income in state of \$21,137 (Northwest Area Foundation, 2007).

In 2007 the state of Oregon had 2,320,043 jobs. The average wage per job was \$40,212. Government services were the largest employer in the state, employing 12.5% of the work force. Only 3% of the workforce statewide is involved in farming. Harney County had 4,451 jobs in 2007 with an average wage of \$29,691. The largest industry employer

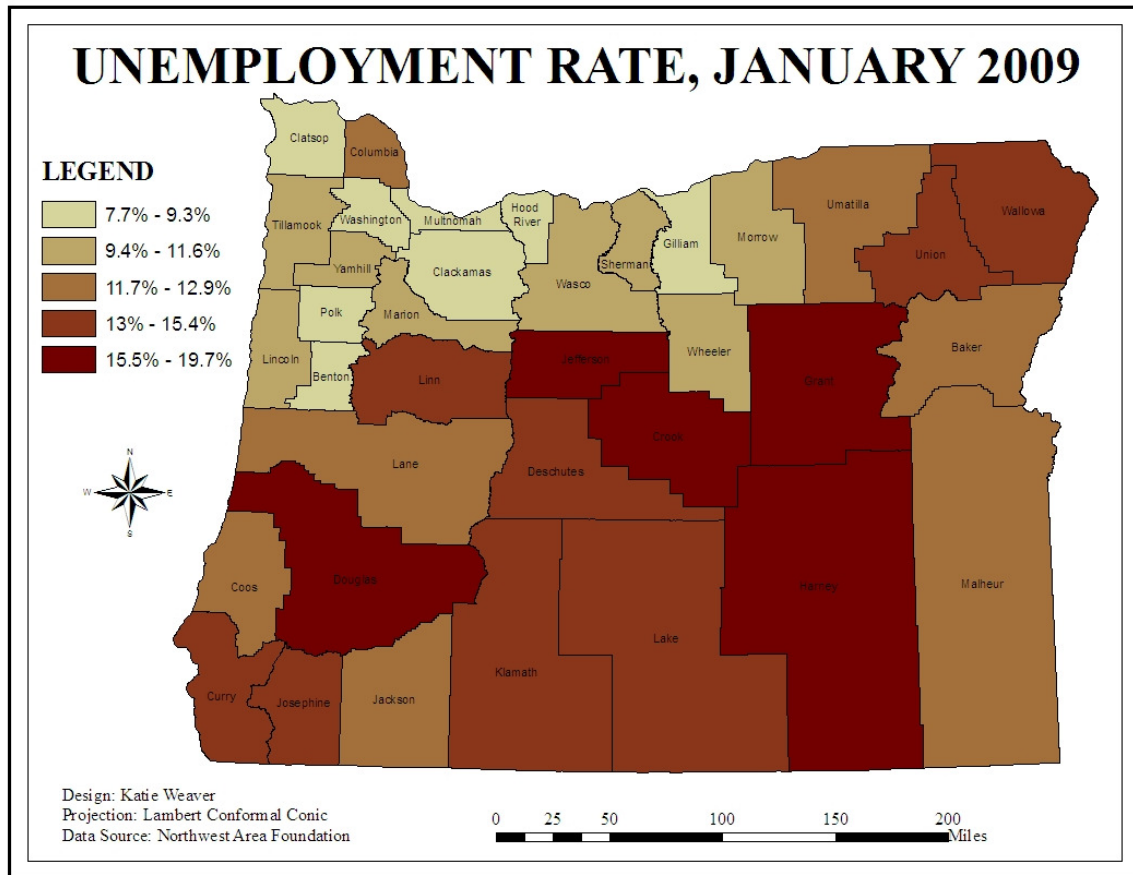
in Harney County was government services, employing 23.7% of the workforce, followed by farm employment at 19.7% and retail employment at 11.1%. Malheur County had 18,674 jobs with the average wage of \$28,267, the third lowest in the state and nearly \$12,000 less than the state average. The largest employers by industry were government at 18.1%, farm employment at 14.9%, retail at 13.7% and health and social services at 10.3% of the work force (Northwest Area Foundation, 2007).



MAP 3.6 Per capita income in 2006 (Northwest Area Foundation).

Unemployment for the state of Oregon was 10.7% in January 2009 (MAP 3.7). This was an increase of 81.7% from the previous January. Harney County had the highest unemployment rate in the state at 19.7%. This is an increase of 7.1% from January 2008. In recent years Harney County has lost several large employers, including Louisiana Pacific and, in March 2009, the Monaco Coach Motorhome factory. Malheur County had

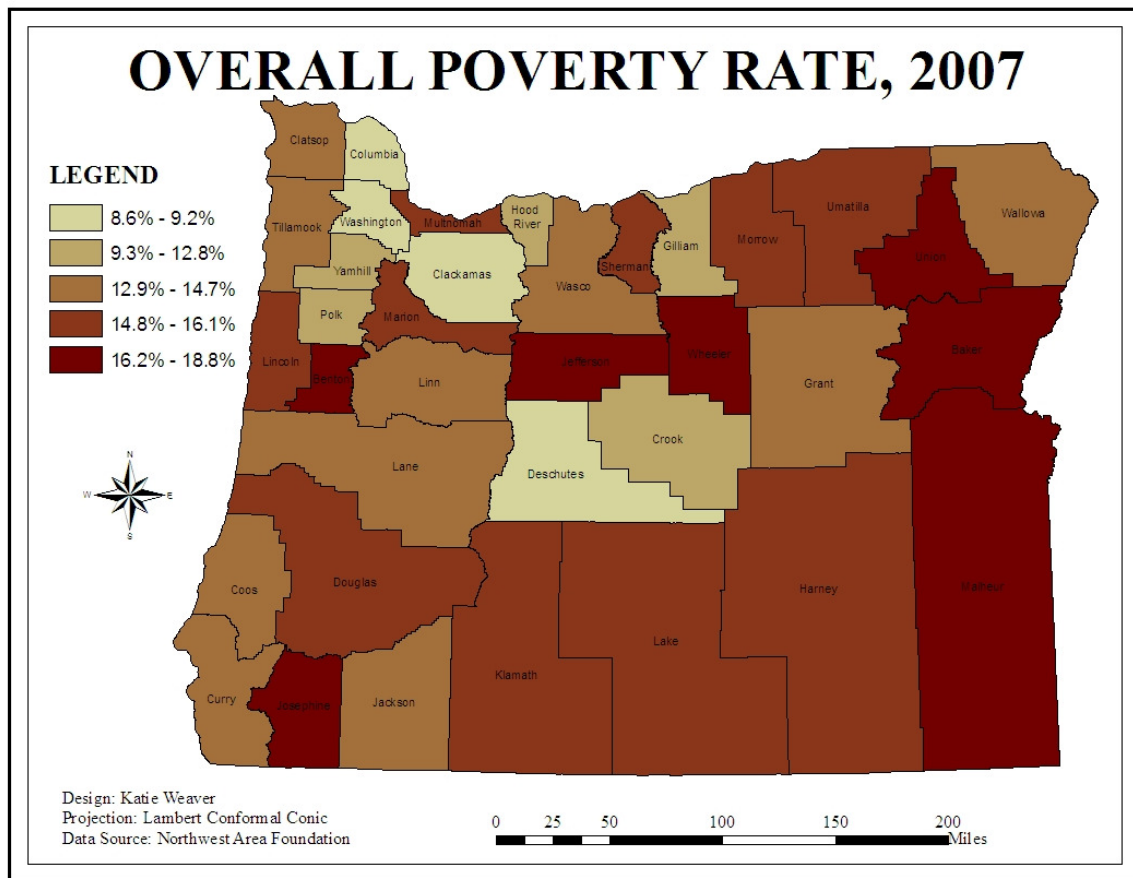
an unemployment rate of 11.7% in January 2009, a 47.2% increase from the previous year (Oregon Employment Department, 2008, 2009).



MAP 3.7 Unemployment rate in January 2009 (Oregon Employment Department).

## Poverty

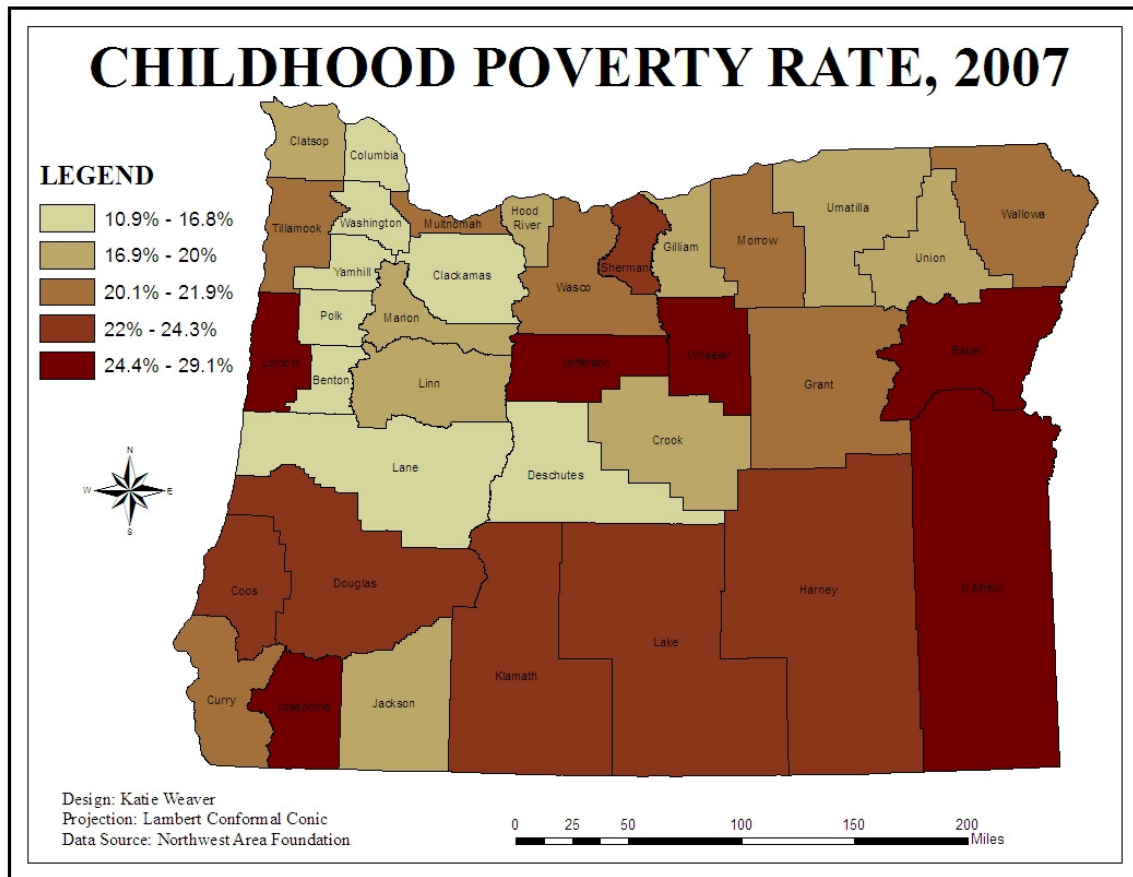
In 2007 the state of Oregon had 13% of its total population living at or below the poverty level (MAP 3.8). This is an increase from 12.4% in 1999. Harney County had 16.1% of its population living in poverty in 2007, the eighth highest poverty rate in the state. This was an increase of 4.3%, up from 11.8% in 1999. Malheur County had 17.6% of its population living in poverty in 2007, the fourth highest rate statewide. While the state as a whole and many individual counties experienced an increase poverty rates, Malheur County had a 1% decrease between 1999 and 2007 (Northwest Area Foundation, 1999, 2007).



MAP 3.8 Population living at or below the poverty level in 2007 (Northwest Area Foundation).

The percentage of children statewide living at or below the poverty level in 1999 was 14.0%. This percentage saw an increase between 1999 and 2007, growing to 17.2% (MAP 3.9). In Harney County the childhood poverty rate was 12.7% in 1999 and nearly doubled by 2007 to 24.2%, the eighth highest rate in the state. Malheur County had a 25.8% childhood poverty rate in 1999. This increased to 26.3% in 2007, the fourth highest in the state (Northwest Area Foundation, 1999, 2007).

The most recent data on poverty rates for people age 65 and over was recorded in 1999. Oregon had an elderly poverty rate of 7.6%. Harney County's elderly poverty rate was 13.9%, the highest in the state, and Malheur County's was 11.6%, the third highest rate statewide (Northwest Area Foundation, 1999).



MAP 3.9 Children living at or below the poverty level in 2007 (Northwest Area Foundation).

### Food Assistance Programs

The National School Lunch Program provides low cost or free lunches to students nationwide based on the student's family size and income. Those children from families with income at or below 130% of the poverty level are eligible for free meals at school. Those students whose families' income falls between 130% and 185% are eligible for reduced-prices meals. In the 2006-2007 school year 41.3% of students in Oregon were eligible for this program.

In the 2006-2007 school year Harney County had ten school districts that reported statistics for the National School Lunch Program. The percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals ranged from a high in South Harney School District of 78.6%

to low in Harney School District of 45.5%. South Harney School District has the fifth highest eligibility rate statewide, of 199 districts reporting, followed by Diamond School District with the sixth highest percentage. Of the ten districts in Harney County, six have at least 55.6% of students eligible and five have at least 72.7% of students eligible.

In the 2006-2007 school year Malheur County had nine school districts report free and reduced-price meal eligibility percentages. These ranged from a high in Harper School District of 75.9%, the ninth highest percentage statewide, to low in Juntura School District of 20%. Of the nine school districts reported, seven have at least 49.8% of students eligible and five have at least 65.5% of students eligible (Northwest Area Foundation, 2007).

In January 2009, 535,066 people received food stamp benefits in Oregon. By May 2009 that number has risen to 601,706, a 12.5% increase. The number of children under the age of 18 receiving food stamp benefits was 218,938 in January, increasing to 242,595 by May, a 10.8% increase. The number of people age 60 and older receiving benefits in January statewide was 45,877. By May, this had increased by 6.0% to 48,648 people.

In January 2009 Harney County had 1,287 total people receiving food stamp benefits. By May 2009 that number of people had increased to 1,443, a 10.8% increase. The number of children 18 and under receiving benefits countywide was 455 in January, increasing to 500 in May, a 9% increase. The number of people age 60 and older receiving benefits in January was 146. By May, this had increased by 4.6% to 153 people.

In Malheur County, there were 5,995 individuals receiving food stamp benefits in January 2009. By May 2009 6,594 people were receiving benefits, a 10% increase. The number of children under the age of 18 receiving food stamp benefits was 3,058 in January, increasing to 3,278 by May, a 7.2% increase. The number of people age 60 and older receiving benefits in January was 497. By May, this had increased by 8.9% to 541 people. (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2009).

Statewide, total distribution of emergency food boxes between August 2008 and July 2009 was 896,228. This was 85.6% increase from the 482,760 boxes distributed in 1999-2000. Emergency food box distribution in Harney County between August 2008 and July 2009 was 999, up from 462 in 1999-2000. This is was 116.2% increase in the nine year time span. Malheur County had 10,188 emergency food boxes distributed between August 2008 and July 2009, a large jump for the 4,784 boxes distributed in between August 1999 and July 2000. This was a 113.0% increase in nine years (Oregon Food Bank, 1999, 2009).



# CHAPTER 4

## The State of Agriculture in Southeast Oregon

To provide for a comparative, contextual analysis, many of the agricultural indicators are compared to state of Oregon data. All data in this section comes from the 2002 and 2007 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Census of Agriculture.

### **Farm Numbers and Acreage**

In 2007 there were 38,553 farms in the state of Oregon, encompassing a total of 16,399,647 acres. Both of these indicators experienced a 4% decline between 2002 and 2007. Oregon was one of only eleven states nationwide, and the only state in the West, that experienced a decline in the number of farms.

In 2002 there were 524 farms in Harney County encompassing over 1.5 million acres. By 2007, Harney County had only lost one farm and experienced a decrease in farm acreage to 1,461,508, a 7% decline over five years. Malheur County had 1,250 farms in 2007 covering 1,170,664 acres of land. The county lost 22 farms between 2002 and 2007, a 2% decrease. Overall, there was a loss of 4,616 total acres of farm land in Malheur County.

In Oregon the average farm size in 2007 was 425 acres, a slight decrease from the average of 427 in 2002. The median size of farms statewide was 29 acres, with the greatest number of farms between 10-49 acres. The average farm in Harney County was 2,794 acres, down from 3,006 acres in 2002, a 7% decrease. The median size of farms in Harney County was 325 acres (FIGURE 4.1). Most farms were 1,000 acres or greater in size. Malheur County farms were an average of 937 acres in 2007, a slight increase from the average size of 924 in 2002. The median size farm in Malheur County was 101 acres, with most farms having between 50-179 acres.

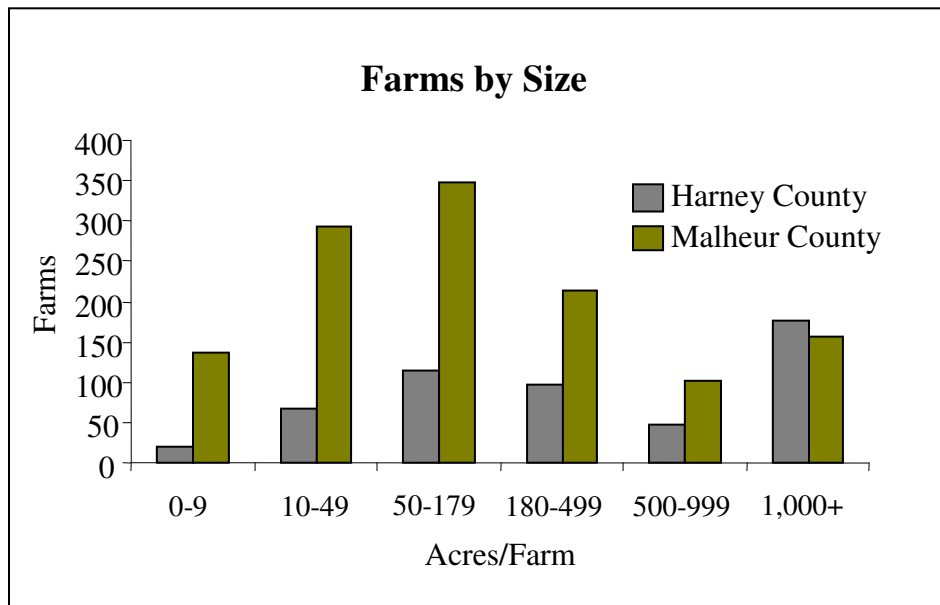


FIGURE 4.1 Farms in Harney and Malheur Counties in 2007 (USDA Census of Agriculture).

In 2007 the greatest type of land in farm production in Harney and Malheur Counties was pasture land, 79.8% and 77.0%, respectively (FIGURE 4.2). Statewide the percentage of farm land in pasture was 55.8%. Oregon had 30.6% of farm land in crops, Harney County had 16.7% and Malheur County had 20.5%.

### Farm Operators and Tenure

The average age of principal farm operators in Oregon in 2007 was 57.5 years old. Harney and Malheur Counties average age of farm operators was 56 years old. There were 38,553 operators statewide; 78.6% were male and 21.4% female. Both Harney and Malheur Counties had more male principal operators than the statewide average. In Harney County 84.7% of farm operators were male and 15.3% female. Malheur County had 89.6% male and 10.4% female.

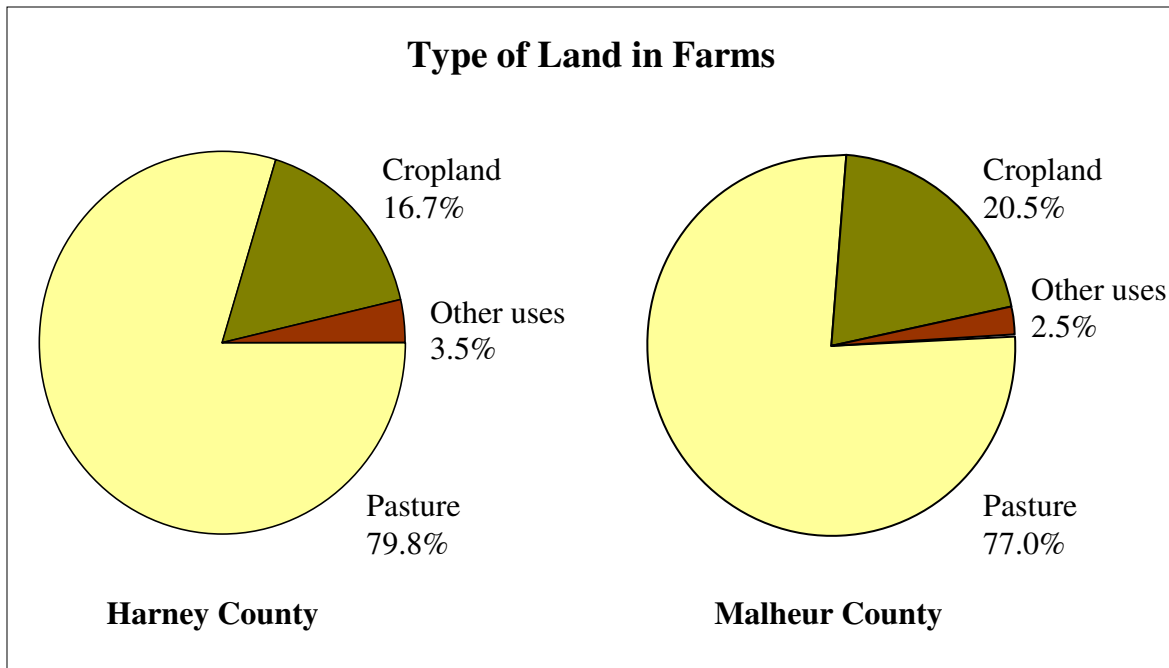


FIGURE 4.2 Types of farm land in Harney and Malheur Counties in 2007 (USDA Census of Agriculture).

Statewide less than half of principal operators, 17,825, identified farming as their primary occupation; 53.8% of single farm operators had off-farm employment that was their primary occupation. Harney County had 302 principal operators; 57.7% of them identified farming as their primary occupation. Malheur County had 778 principal operators; 62.2% of them identified farming as their primary occupation.

Statewide 30,160 farmers, or 78.2%, were full owners of their farms, 16% were part owners and 5.8% were tenants. Harney County had 380 farmers that were full owners, 114 that were part owners and 29 that were tenants. Malheur County had 857 farmers that were full owners, 299 that were part owners and 94 that were tenants (FIGURE 4.3).

Statewide, the average number of years that principal operators have owned their current farm is 19.5 years. By a large margin, 71.2%, most farms have been under current ownership for ten or more years. In Harney County the average number of years that principal operators have owned their current farm is 16.3 years. Most farms, 64.1%, have been under current ownership for more than ten years. In Malheur County the average

number of years that principal operators have owned their current farm is 20.6 years, slightly higher than the statewide average. Nearly 70% of farms have been under current ownership for more than ten years (FIGURE 4.4).

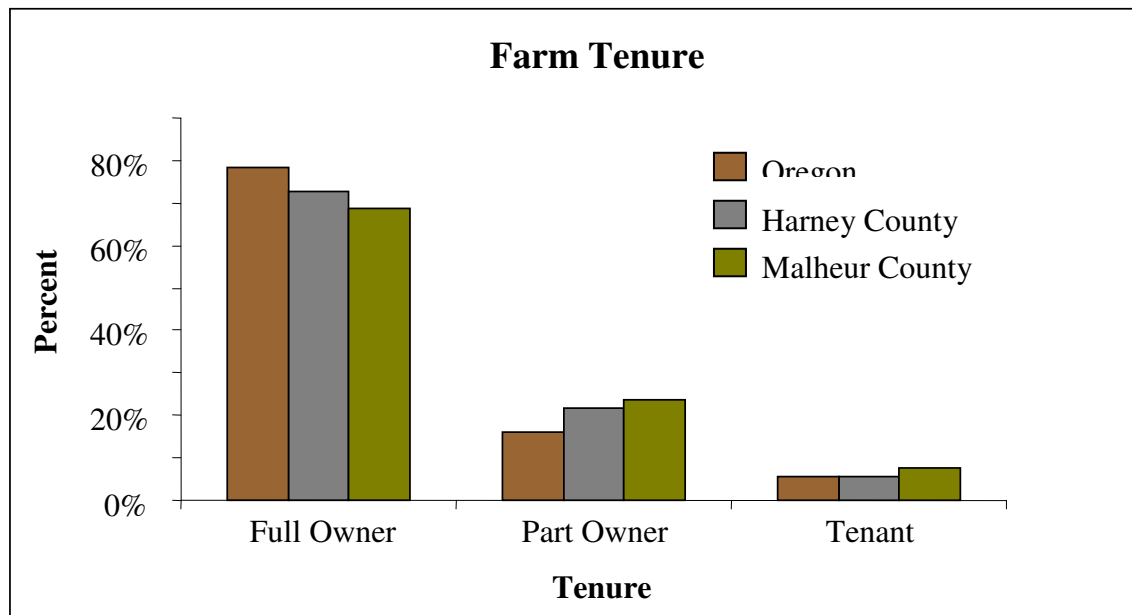


FIGURE 4.3 Farm tenure in 2007 (USDA Census of Agriculture).

In 2007, Oregon had 364 farms with Asian operators. Of those, 267 farms had Asian principal operators on farms totaling 31,202 acres. Statewide there were 48 farms that had Black or African American operators, of which 36 were principal operators farming a total of 2,738 acres. There were 1,182 farms statewide that had operators of Spanish, Hispanic or Latino origin. Of these, 789 were principal operators on 116,117 acres. There were 703 farms that had American Indian or Alaska Native operators, of which 497 were principal operators on 577,470 acres.

In 2007 Harney County had no Asian operators and neither Harney nor Malheur Counties had Black or African American operators. Malheur County had 41 farms with Asian operators, of which 35 had Asian principal operators on 15,055 acres. Harney County had 21 farms with Spanish, Hispanic or Latino operators, of which 12 were run by principal operators over 7,672 acres. Malheur County had 63 farms with Spanish, Hispanic or

Latino operators, of which 46 were principal operators over 18,800 acres. Harney County had 4 farms with American Indian or Alaska Native operators; all four of them were principal operators. Malheur County had 21 farms with American Indian or Alaska Native operators, 11 of which were principal operators over 1,458 acres.

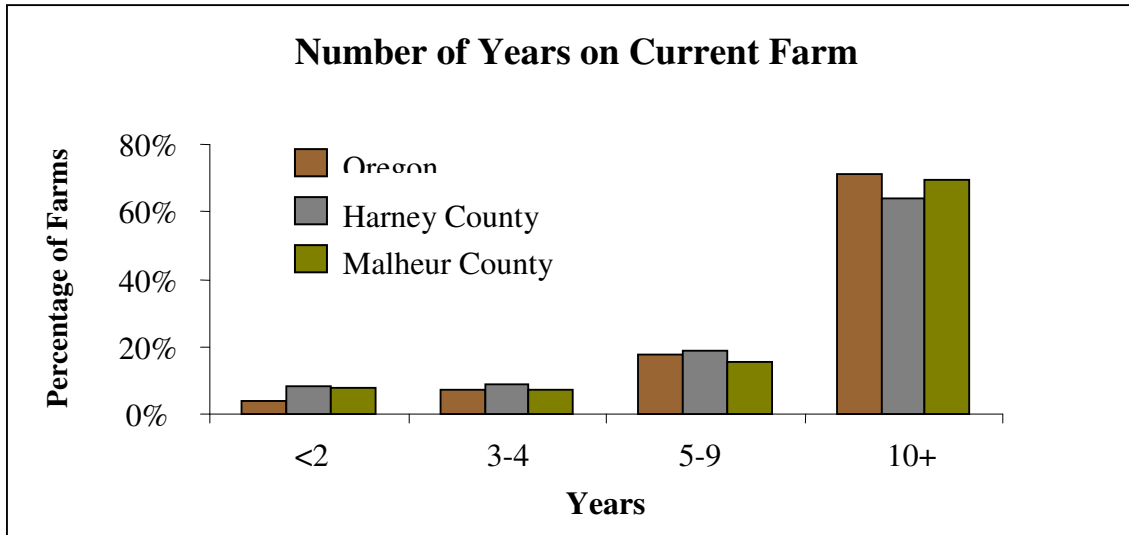


FIGURE 4.4 Number of years on farm, 2007 (USDA Census of Agriculture).

### Market Value of Agricultural Products

The estimated market value of Oregon farm land and buildings in 2007 was more than \$31 billion dollars, a 51.2% increase in estimated value from 2002. This was an average of \$804,145 per farm (FIGURE 4.5) and \$1,890 per acre (FIGURE 4.6). The market value of all agricultural products sold statewide in 2007 was over \$4.3 billion, a 37% increase from 2002. This was an average of \$113,769 per farm (FIGURE 4.7). The total value of crops was nearly \$3 billion and livestock and poultry were \$1.4 billion. Government payments were a total of \$76,491,000 statewide in 2007, a 47% increase from 2002. The average per farm was \$14,954 (FIGURE 4.7) and \$4.66 per acre (FIGURE 4.8).

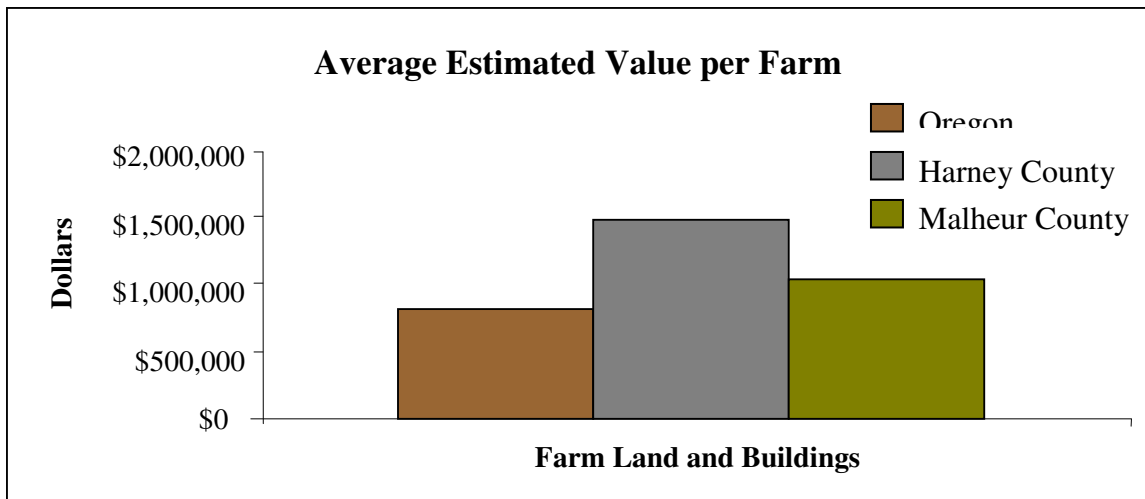


FIGURE 4.5 Value of farm land and buildings in 2007 (USDA Census of Agriculture).

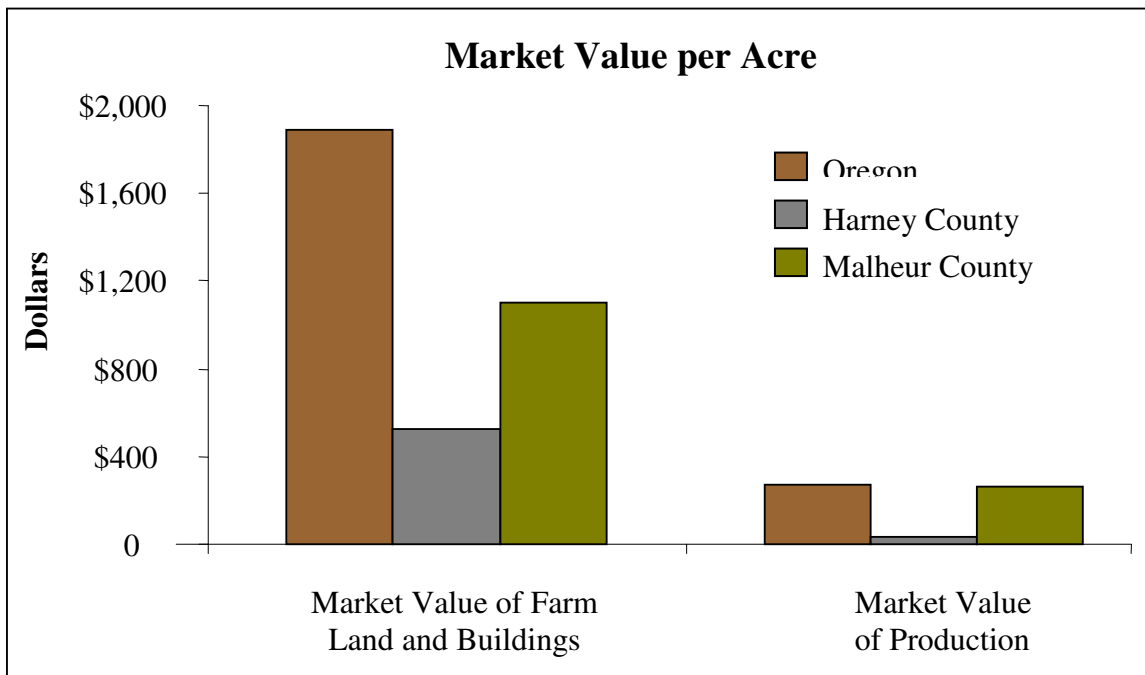


FIGURE 4.6 Market value of farm land and buildings and production per acre, 2007 (USDA Census of Agriculture).

The estimated market value of farm land and buildings in Harney County in 2007 was more than \$764 million dollars, a 78% increase in estimated value from 2002. This was an average of \$1,461,377 per farm and \$523 per acre. The 2007 market value of all agricultural products sold in Harney County was over \$51.7 million, a 45.5% increase

from 2002. This was an average of \$98,919 per farm. The total value of crops was \$13.3 million and livestock and poultry were \$38.4 million. Government payments were a total of \$535,000 in Harney County in 2007, a 47% decrease from 2002. The average per farm was \$6,863 and \$0.37 per acre.

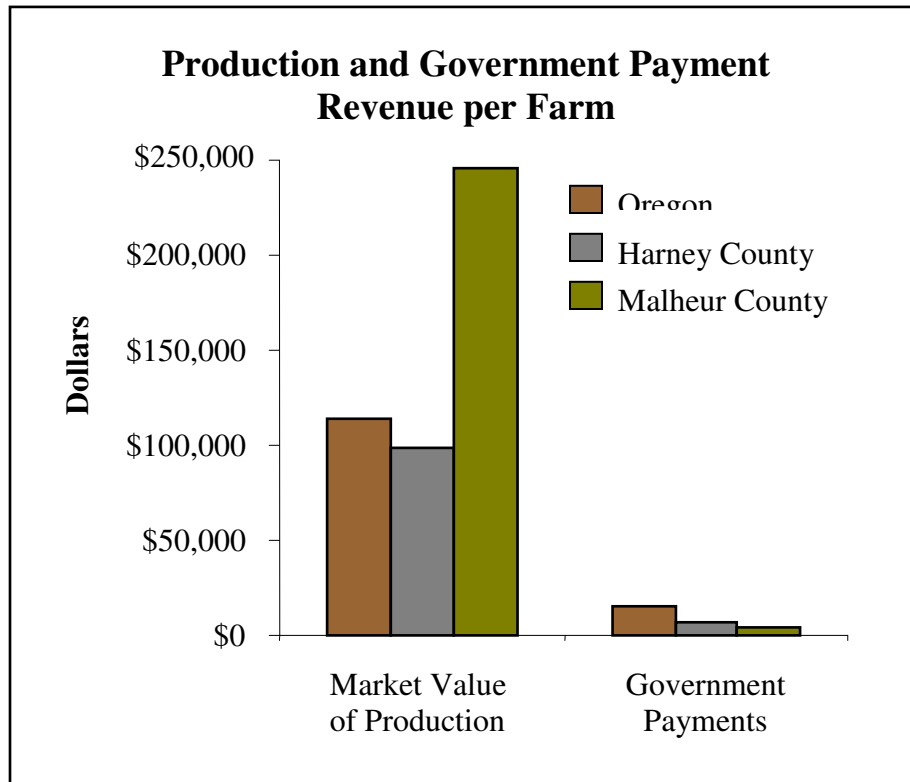


FIGURE 4.7 Market value of farm production and government payments in 2007 (USDA Census of Agriculture).

The estimated market value of farm land and buildings in Malheur County in 2007 was nearly \$1.3 billion dollars, an 83.7% increase in estimated value from 2002. This was an average of \$1,028,826 per farm and \$1,099 per acre. The market value of all agricultural products in Malheur County was over \$306 million, a 32.4% increase from 2002, the sixth highest value statewide. This was an average of \$245,436 per farm. The crops value was nearly \$115 million and livestock and poultry were over \$192 million. Government payments were a total of \$2,113,000 in Malheur County in 2007, a 13% increase from 2002. The average per farm was \$4,814 and \$1.80 per acre.

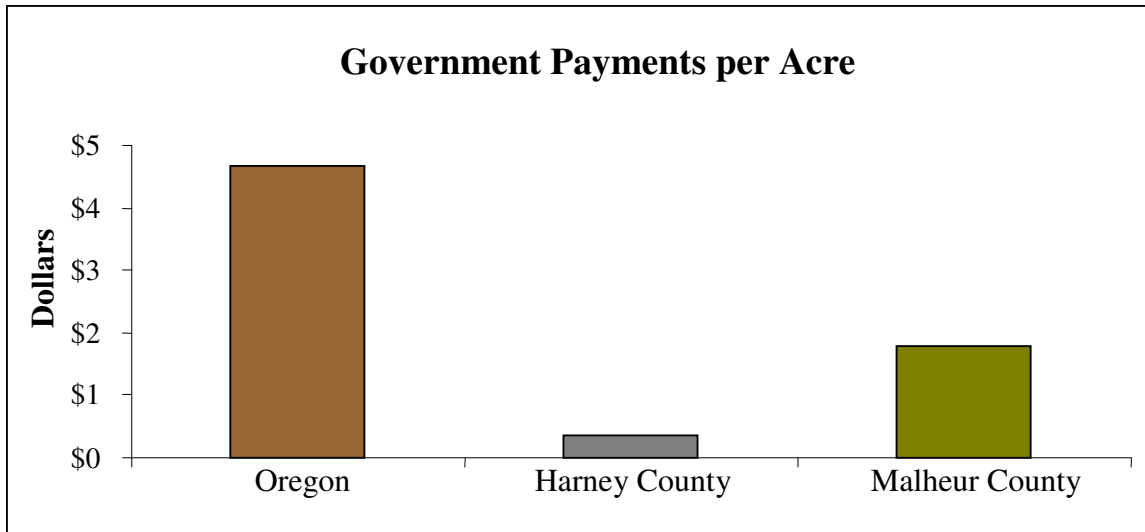


FIGURE 4.8 Average government payments per acre, 2007 (USDA Census of Agriculture).

### Agricultural Indicator Rankings

In 2007 Harney County was ranked first in the state for acres of forage land. This is all hay and haylage, grass silage and greenchop. It is ranked third in the number of cattle and calves. Both of these indicators rank in the top 4% of all counties nationwide (FIGURE 5.1). These rankings, in combination with anecdotal evidence, reveal the significant importance of ranching to Harney County's economy.

Malheur County has several agricultural indicators that rank high state and nationwide. Most notably, it has the most acres planted in dry onions statewide and nationally. The County is also ranked first statewide in the number of cattle and calves and in the top 2% of counties nationwide. Malheur County has the second highest value of livestock, poultry and their products in the state and is the top 5% nationwide. The number of pheasants in the county rank it second statewide and in the top 6% nationally (FIGURE 5.2).



### Harney County Agricultural Indicator Rankings

Indicator	State Rank	Universe	U.S. Rank	Universe
Total market value of agriculture products sold (\$1,000)	22	36	1,531	3,076
Value of crops including nursery and greenhouse	27	36	1,704	3,072
Total value of livestock, Poultry and their products	12	36	979	3,069
Cattle and calves (number)	3	36	113	3,060
Forage- hay and haylage, grass silage and greenchop land (acres)	1	36	114	3,060

FIGURE 5.1 Select Harney County agricultural indicators, as compared to counties state and nationwide (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2007).

### Malheur County Agricultural Indicator Rankings

Indicator	State Rank	Universe	U.S. Rank	Universe
Total market value of agriculture products sold (\$1,000)	6	36	154	3,076
Value of crops including nursery and greenhouse	8	36	300	3,072
Total value of livestock, poultry and their products	2	36	137	3,069
Cattle and calves (number)	1	36	35	3,060
Pheasants (number)	2	28	86	1,544
Sheep and lambs (number)	9	36	153	2,891
Forage- hay and haylage, grass silage and greenchop land (acres)	4	36	54	3,060
Vegetables harvested, all (acres)	4	32	59	2,794
Onions, dry (acres)	1	25	1	1,013

FIGURE 5.2 Select Malheur County agricultural indicators, as compared to counties state and nationwide (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2007).

# CHAPTER 5

## Development of the Study

This chapter describes the research design and methodology. The data sources are outlined followed by the methodology by which the project was designed and implemented. Finally, the limitations and value of the project are summarized.

### **Data Source**

Data for this study was collected from multiple sources. The economic and demographic data came from the Northwest Area Foundation Indicators website, Oregon Department of Human Services, Oregon Employment Department, Oregon Food Bank and U.S. Census Bureau. Agriculture data came from the United States Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture.

Empirical data was collected from a series of informal interviews and conversations and focus groups in communities throughout southeast Oregon.

### **Methodology**

The CFA of southeast Oregon used a mixed methods approach that combines the use of quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative data (focus groups and interviews) and quantitative data (census data) were collected simultaneously to create an integrated analysis that explored a wide range of food system issues. This approach provided a broad regional analysis of the existing food system and used interviews and focus group discussions as empirical evidence to identify assets and needs in Harney and Malheur Counties. The simultaneous collection and analysis of different data types provided a comprehensive examination of food-related issues. This method proved effective in involving diverse stakeholders across the food system, leading to the creation of suggestions for a more food secure region.

## **Limitations and Value of the Study**

Due to the limited understanding of the existing food system in southeast Oregon, the CFA was used to gain better understanding of the existing structure and identify potential solutions to create a more food secure region. While this knowledge helps to identify many assets and needs in Harney and Malheur Counties, it is limited in its depth and scope. The CFA is meant to be a working document as many perspectives and questions remain unknown.

The CFA is the first project in the region to take a broad, community-based approach to examining southeast Oregon's food system in its entirety. Specifically, the CFA explored socioeconomic and agricultural trends in Harney and Malheur Counties. By using numerous stakeholder interviews and focus groups the CFA identified issues and needs in the food system not readily apparent. The intent of this report is to increase awareness and understanding of these issues, engage diverse stakeholders in the process and collectively begin working on potential solutions for a more food secure region. This work is important because everyone should have access to healthy food regardless of their location or socioeconomic status.

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# APPENDIX A

## Sample Interview Questions

### **Producers:**

What is the history of your farm/ranch?

Is it full time profession or do you work off the farm/ranch?

Acres farmed/ranched?

Method of farming or ranching?

Product (raw, finished)?

Profitable? Subsidies?

Whom do you sell to?

What is your product volume?

Do you donate product to anti-hunger efforts?

Do you sell locally or directly to consumers?

Do you market locally?

Do you know of any direct sale opportunities?

How would you define your local market?

Do you have any interest in selling locally?

Are you interested in being in a local growers guide?

Have you ever considered a farmers' market, farm stand or website?

Is there any assistance that would help you sell locally?

What are the barriers to the direct sales?

Are there any laws or policies that affect food production, distribution or consumption?

Do you have any transportation issues?

Are there any farmland preservation efforts in your area?

What is the future of your farm/ranch?

Using the scales provided below indicate the degree to which the following factors limits your direct local sales.

Difficult to find, interact, or correspond with retailers or consumers

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Unable to produce sufficient quantity to meet demand

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Lack of distribution system for local products

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Lack of local processing facilities

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Requires too much time

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Price premiums paid to farmer

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Insufficient demand for local products

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

**Retail:**

How would you characterize your business?

How many employees do you have?

Amount of product sold in a year?

Do you donate product to anti-hunger efforts?

What is the geographic extent of your customers?

Who makes the purchasing decisions?

How would you define locally-grown product?

Do you sell local products?

Do you ever have requests for local products?

What barriers exist for people accessing food in your region?

What are the barriers to buying directly from producers?

Are there any laws or policies that affect food production, distribution or consumption?

Using the scales below, indicate the types of 'locally grown/produced' food products you would like to sell at this establishment?

Fruits, vegetables, and herbs

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Meat, fish, and game

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Dairy products

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Bread, flour, and baked goods

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Jams, preserves, honey, and sauces

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Tinned, packaged, or pre-prepared goods

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Drinks (alcoholic and soft)

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Other \_\_\_\_\_

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Using the scales below, indicate the degree to which you perceive the following factors as limitations to your store carrying 'locally grown/produced' foods?

Connecting with producers

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Insufficient quantity to meet demand

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Inferior quality

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Price

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Inconsistent supply/seasonality

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Transportation and receiving products

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

No demand for these types of products

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

Other \_\_\_\_\_

(low) 1 2 3 4 5 (high)

**Agency & Advocacy:**

Do you think many people in the community have a problem with food security?

Who are the food insecure in your community?

Where do they live?

How do they cope with food insecurity?

Do you think food is accessible, available and affordable?

How do they access food?

What barriers do they encounter in accessing food?

How does the community address food insecurity?

What else could be done to address food insecurity?

What local agencies are involved in feeding people?

Who are the key players?

How do people access emergency food supplies?

Are there any meal sites in your community?

Do you know of anyone that would be interested in donating food, hosting a meal site or sponsoring a food pantry?

How would you define/describe your local food system?

Are there any laws or policies that affect food production, distribution or consumption that affect food security?

Are there any transportation issues?

**Consumers:**

Have you ever run out of food? How often does it happen?

Do you ever worry about running out of food?

What do you do if you don't have enough food?

Do you think food is accessible, available and affordable?

Where do you get your food?

How do you get to the store?

What barriers do you encounter in accessing food?

What else could be done to address these barriers?



Are there any community gardens, farm stands or farmers' markets in your community?

Do you grow your own food?

Are there any people that grow extra vegetables and share them with the community?

Are there any meal sites in your community?

What food assistance programs do or have you participated in?

How important are food assistance programs to your household? Why?

What are the best features of food assistance programs?

What are some problems you've had with food assistance programs?

If you are not using a program(s), why?

Do access emergency food supplies?

How often do you rely on this source?

Describe how you think your community could become more food secure.

# APPENDIX B

## Sample Focus Group Questions

### **I. What economic factors affect your ability to make ends meet each month?**

- A. Is there enough work in this area?
- B. Is there safe and affordable child care?
- C. What are your modes of transportation?
- D. Do you have health insurance?

### **II. Do you think food is accessible, available and affordable?**

- A. How do you feed the people in your household?
  - i. Where do you get your food?
  - ii. How do you get to the store?
- B. Are there enough community resources to prevent families from being hungry?
- C. Do you encounter any barriers in accessing food?
- D. What else could be done to address these barriers?
- E. Have you ever run out of food?
  - i. Do you ever worry about running out of food?
  - ii. How often does it happen?
  - iii. What do you do if you don't have enough food?

### **III. Have you participated in a food assistance program?**

- A. How important are food assistance programs to your household? Why?
- B. What are the best features of food assistance programs?
- C. What are some problems you've had with food assistance programs?
- D. If you are not using a program(s), why?
- E. Do you use any emergency food supplies?
- F. How often do you rely on this source?

**V. Do you or have you ever grown your own food?**

- A. Are there barriers to you growing food?
- B. Do you buy food from someone directly?
- C. Is there any knowledge, skills or resources that would help you to grow your own food?
- D. Do you know of anyone that sells their food to the public?
- E. Are you interested in buying any food locally or direct from the producer?