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High Plains Food Co-op offers unique markets to local food

Kansas Farmers Union hosted a tour of the High Plains Food Cooperative (HPFC) in St Francis, Kansas in September, with the assistance of Rawlins County Economic Development. The tour included witnessing the co-op in action during their delivery day, touring four co-op members operations and listening to five co-op members about their operations.

Pictures can be found on flickr.com/ksfarmersunion.

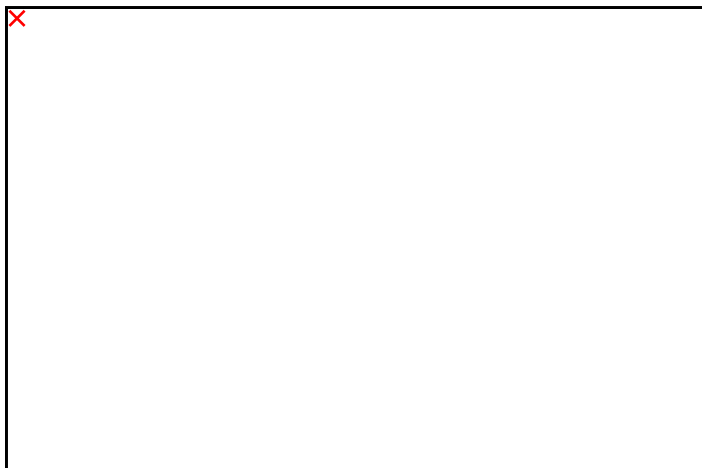
On Sept. 19 during the Beginning Farmer Workshop in Atwood four co-op producers explained their operations.

Meranda Simminger of Simminger Variety Farms in Ludell talked about raising rabbits. She sells ground rabbit, bratwurst, sausage, jerky, whole rabbit, soup rabbit, smoked rabbit, rabbit fertilizer and rabbit feet. She is also working on some new products with the hide. Her parents and brother also sell items through the co-op, including goats, hogs, cattle, vegetables and eggs.

"One of my favorite things that we've been able to do with the food co-op so far is when we get to go to Denver and meet our consumers," Simminger said. "That is the funniest part because we get to shake the people's hands that you see every month on the internet and get to say thank you for buying our products. and it is so neat to connect with them."

Duane Cheney with Sharing the Bounty grows vegetables with his wife on their five acres near Colby. They also sell eggs and whole chickens. They sell their products at farmers markets, a CSA and the co-op.

"High Plains Food Co-op has been another marketing that I really am excited about," Cheney said. "At the first of the month, when we put everything on there, my wife's on that computer forever, hollering at me that we've got another order. And it's been really cool. Its been a great additive to what we do and we're hoping to increase our income through the co-op."



L to R: Meranda Simminger, Duane Cheney, Chris Schmidt

John Rundell with J&Z Farms in Trenton, Neb. spoke about raising Yak, an animal native to Tibet. He described them as very tough and intelligent. The cows usually mature to around 600 pounds. They sell through HPFC and a small store in Trenton.

"The meat is very similar to buffalo meat: very high in protein, very low in fat. Yak meat has a little moisture in it. The roasts are not near as dry as a buffalo roast," Rundell said. "There's a lot of aversion to the name Yak. you say, yak, or that can't be any good. I think we struggle with that some. but most of the people that try yak like it."

Chris Schmidt with Schmidt's Premium Meats near Atwood is one of the original members that got the High Plains Food Co-op started in 2007. He produces all natural beef, chicken and eggs. He sells through the co-op, to the grocery store in Atwood and directly to consumers.

Chris and his wife Sherri had been marketing their beef in the Denver area for several years when they attended a Kansas Farmers Union conference in Lindsborg where members of the Oklahoma Food Co-op spoke about how they were selling food in Oklahoma City.

"On the way home we were really, really excited because we had been marketing our beef out there in Colorado for quite a few years and after learning about the Oklahoma Food Co-op, we realized the potential of marketing all kinds of products to people out in Colorado," Schmidt said. "At that time the farm economy was pretty poor. At that conference they said that if farm families could earn as little as \$600 more a month that would be enough to keep them on the farm, and the food co-op they felt was a really good way of doing this."

While the Schmidt's came up with the idea, Chris credits Chris Sramek for getting the co-op going. Rocky Mountain Farmers Union Cooperative Development Center also helped the group get HPFC started by providing expertise and seed dollars.

"Being involved in the farm, we really didn't have much time to pursue what eventually became High Plains Food Co-op, and that's where Chris Sramek came in. He's the one that actually got the ball rolling and got the meetings organized," Schmidt said.

During the Co-op's monthly delivery day, tour attendees witnessed the co-op in action when Kansas producers dropped their products off in St Francis. There they toured Becky's Bierocks and learned about Manna Bakery.



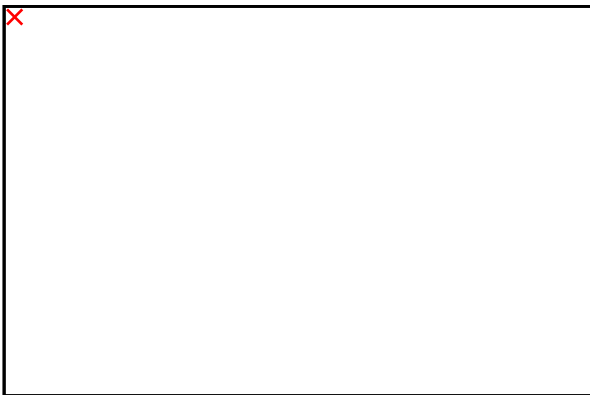
HPFC producers sort items by each drop off point.

Becky Robertson, owner of Becky's Bierocks and one of the original HPFC members, along with nine employees make 75-100 dozen bierocks a day, 4 days a week. She gets her cabbage from a producer in Oklahoma, pork from Rattlesnake Ridge and some beef from RJ Klie Organics. Becky's Bierocks are sold in Dillions, independent grocers, hospitals and through HPFC.

Manna Bakery is located between Goodland and St Francis where they give about five adults with disabilities a chance to live independently. They opened four years ago and make preservative free products including fresh bread, tortillas, cookies, egg noodles and more. They sell to a coffee shop in St Francis, the Farmers Market in Goodland, through the HPFC and take orders over the phone.

The first tour stop was at Prairie House Herbs with Jo Hagney where she specializes in herb mixes with no added salt. She also has goats raised for their cashmere wool. they have a small store on the farm and sell through the HPFC. She is also one of the original co-op members.

JoAnn Klie then gave a tour of RJ Klie Organics where they raise organic cattle, organic hay, organic wheat flour, organic triticale flour and organic sweet corn kernels and white and blue corn meal. They have been certified organic for eight years and currently have 1,800 acres certified and 320 in transition. JoAnn said their yields really haven't dropped and the weeds have decreased. They have been selling through the HPFC for three years and average 50 to 60 orders each month.



Tour attendees feed RJ Klie's pigs.

Heather Leibbrandt gave the last tour at her farm, Rattlesnake Ridge Ranch, where they raise chickens, grass fed beef and free range heritage pigs. Heather, her husband, seven boys and one girl manage the farm. They sell through the HPFC and to the local sale barn.

"It's fun to share a product we love," Leibbrandt said.

The High Plains Food Co-op is now five years old and has 275 customers with an average order size of about \$70 each month, Sramek said. The third Thursday of each month HPFC producers send their customers' orders to Denver, Colorado, which are then distributed by volunteers to about 12 pick up points around the Denver area.

"We've seen a tremendous growth in the food co-op. Its been an exciting endeavor for I think everybody that's been involved. We just really look forward to further expansion both in customer base and pick up points," Schmidt said. "Its just amazing the possibilities that are there. It just takes a lot of work. Its quite an undertaking when you think about it. the number of products that we have and the number of people that are involved."

A special thank you to the following producers for providing food during the workshop and tours: Schmidt's Premium Meats, Becky's Bierocks, Sharing the Bounty, The Satisfiers, Cooper Kitchens, Manna Bakery, J&Z Farms and Pochop Farms.

All the producers' products are available to consumers outside of the Denver area by purchasing direct from the producer. Their products can be found on highplainsfood.org.