

The Register-Herald, Beckley, West Virginia

May 2, 2011

Greenbrier Valley farm data shared

By *Tina Alvey*

Register-Herald Reporter

LEWISBURG — In a region peppered with small farms, residents of the Greenbrier Valley surprisingly spend most of their food dollars on edibles produced outside the three-county area, according to data gathered by a food systems expert and presented here Wednesday evening.

Ken Meter, who works for the Crossroads Resource Center in Minneapolis, said farms in the valley — defined as Greenbrier, Monroe and Pocahontas counties — produce \$74 million worth of food per year, while consumers here spend \$139 million on food, but only \$14 million of that expenditure goes to local products.

“The producer and the consumer never talk to each other,” Meter said, pointing out only 152 of the valley’s 1,978 farms sell directly to consumers.

The valley’s farmers follow the statewide trend of focusing most of their resources on the care and feeding of animals, with cattle, poultry and eggs making up the bulk of farming operations in the three counties, Meter said.

Researcher Fritz Boettner of Downstream Strategies, a consulting firm, noted while 106,080 acres of Greenbrier County have “farmland potential,” based on such factors as slope and climate, only 38,498 acres are currently used for farming.

Monroe and Pocahontas counties show similar ratios of use, albeit on a smaller scale than Greenbrier’s.

“It’s larger than just ‘Can the land produce the crop,’” Boettner cautioned.

He said variables such as location of population centers, land ownership and the viability of the soil figure into whether potential farmland can transition into productive farms.

All of the researchers involved in the “Finding Food in the Greenbrier Valley” project, sponsored by the Greenbrier Valley Economic Development Corporation, discussed innovations in marketing, networking and cooperating involving farmers, processors and consumers.

“It’s about producing health in our communities,” Meter said. “Local foods is the best path toward economic recovery.”

Meter touched upon such innovative practices as creating business clusters, where producers, processors and distributors all occupy space in the same structure or complex of structures, with each providing products and/or services the others need.

Boettner and his associate Laura Hartz spoke about encouraging government to provide incentives for schools to buy local products, direct from the farmer, or, on the flip side, establishing organic farms that would cater to a larger, metro market.

Of the latter notion, Hartz said, “It can be a way to achieve a higher price point.”

One local farmer in the audience scoffed at the dichotomy of touting the idea of “buying local” while also encouraging the valley’s farmers to market their products in such far-flung locales as Baltimore and Philadelphia.

Hartz responded that, as a researcher, she was not promoting one solution over another, but rather was presenting several options, based on the data she and Boettner have collected.

— E-mail: talvey@register-herald.com