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## NEWS RELEASE

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

#### **Sustainable Ag Conference panel takes aim at America's food system**

By Mark Parker

When it comes to making the American food system more diversified, sustainable and family farm friendly, "Happy talk doesn't get it done," according to Mike Callicrate, an independent cattleman, entrepreneur and political activist who was part of a panel discussion at the Kansas Rural Center's recent Sustainable Agriculture Conference in Emporia.

"Never before has there been so much money in agriculture — you just don't get it," he told a large group of farmers, growers and others gathered for the event sponsored by the Kansas Rural Center.

Citing an industrialized agricultural system that stifles diversity as well as the economic potential of independent producers, Callicrate said there's no doubt that the system is broken. "Caring about your country and caring about the community you live in — that's how to fix it," he asserted.

Although consumer interest in locally produced food is at an all-time high, there is extreme resistance on the part of big agriculture, Callicrate said, adding that huge sums of money are being spent to promote industrial agriculture "with the family farmer's face on it."

Much of that money comes from farmer-fed checkoff programs that force farmers to fund their own destruction, Callicrate contended. "The battle," he added, "is between industrial agriculture and family farm agriculture."

The nation needs a lot more family farms and a lot more diversification on those farms, said Callicrate, who has been the lead plaintiff in two class action lawsuits against major meat packers. Changing the current system will not be easy, he added. It must begin in local communities and with getting involved in making them better places to live.

Callicrate urged producers to get engaged in changing food and rural policies. "We need to make it easier to do the right thing and harder to do the wrong thing," he said.

Other members of the panel discussed a wide range of challenges and opportunities facing advocates of a more sustainable food production system.

Eileen Horn, director of the Douglas County Food Policy Council, emphasized that the key to encouraging local, sustainable food production is working with other interested organizations and individuals. "Food is a consensus issue for a lot of groups and people so we can really build alliances," she observed.

Formed in 2009, the Douglas County Food Policy Council is made up of growers, food retailers and other stakeholders. After assessing the local food system, the Council's first recommendation was a program adopted by the Douglas County that leases vacant and under-utilized county land to local growers for a dollar per acre. The program especially helps young growers get a start and it has reduced the county's investment in upkeep of previously unused ground.

“The good news is that these folks are accessible,” Horn said of public officials. She suggesting that people contact their own local officials to let them know that local food systems are important.

Chris Wilson, who serves as deputy secretary of the Kansas Department of Agriculture, outlined some of the issues facing agriculture in the state. Protecting and extending the utility of the Ogallala Aquifer remains a priority to the Department, she said. Wilson also emphasized the importance of investing in research and technological development to solve the problems of both producers and consumers. Efforts at both the University of Kansas and Kansas State University to develop renewable fuel from biomass are examples of such research, she noted.

Wilson cited several challenges facing the state, including the difficulty of recruiting farm labor and doing a better job of connecting producers and consumers.

David Coltrain, Kansas State University Research and Extension agent in the River Valley Extension District, discussed his experiences in growing and marketing vegetables. Coltrain, who had as much as 60 acres of vegetable crops in southeast Kansas, also talked about a north central Kansas specialty crop project that encourages direct marketing of food crops. He noted that there has been an increase in both locally grown food production and farmer’s markets in the region. Meeting the increasing demand for locally grown food requires skills in both production and marketing, he said, adding that there are opportunities for innovative producers.

Coltrain said that the tools being used to facilitate the connection between local growers and local consumers are effective but should be intensified: “We need to do a lot more of what we’re doing now.”

“The potential to grow is amazing,” he asserted.

State Senator Marci Francisco of Lawrence told the crowd that it is important to recognize the importance of agriculture to Kansas. Citing a focus on increasing the quantitative production of farm commodities, she suggested that it’s time to focus on food production with an eye on limited resources in the future.

Francisco also emphasized that the state needs to encourage farming practices that protect the state’s reservoirs as well as rural development. She said locally grown food production and food processing could be sources of employment in areas where the development of manufacturing is unlikely due to inadequate infrastructure, resources or work force.

Francisco, who is the Ranking Democrat on the Senate Agriculture Committee, also noted that there are several school lunch programs around the state that are helping connect children with food production.

The panel discussion was led by Lecompton market gardener Paul Johnson who statistically outlined the dramatic trend toward fewer and larger Kansas farms. Despite a landscape of huge farms dominating the state, Johnson noted, only about one-half of Kansas communities have a supermarket.

The Kansas Sustainable Agriculture Conference’s theme this year was “Options, Opportunities and Optimism: Cultivating Our Food and Farm Future. About 120 people attended the event held at Flint Hills Technical College in Emporia. Co-sponsors included the Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops, Kansas SARE, the Kansas Farmers Union, Kansas Wildlife Federation, Kansas Sierra club, and the Community Mercantile. The conference also received partial funding from the USDA Risk Management Agency for its workshops.

The Kansas Rural Center is a grassroots organization committed to economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially sustainable rural culture. For more information, contact KRC by calling 785-873-3431 or by visiting the Kansas Rural Center web site, [www.kansasruralcenter.org](http://www.kansasruralcenter.org)