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## NEWS RELEASE

November 29, 2011 Contact: Mary Fund, KRC, 785-873-3431; [ksrc@rainbowtel.net](mailto:ksrc@rainbowtel.net)

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

#### Rethinking food production with an eye to the future

By Mark Parker

Agriculture is a fast-moving train and no one knows exactly what's up around the bend. For Dan Nagengast, reconnecting food production with food consumption is critical to keeping that train on the track.

Speaking at the Kansas Rural Center's recent Sustainable Agriculture Conference in Emporia, Nagengast laid out compelling concerns about the current industrialized approach to feeding the planet in light of a long list of local and global issues.

"Can our dominant system cope?" asked the Lawrence farmer who recently stepped down after shepherding the Kansas Rural Center for 20 years as its executive director. "I don't think (industrial agriculture) will go away for a long, long time but shouldn't we be looking at different models?"

Decreasing fossil fuel reliance, using water more efficiently, reducing waste and understanding that many costs of the industrial food production model are externalized rather than attributed to the system that incurred them are key issues that must be addressed, Nagengast said. At the heart of his concerns, however, are people and the disconnect between food production and food consumption.

He noted that global agriculture has 219,000 new mouths to feed every day in a world that is becoming increasingly urbanized. The trend toward fewer and larger farms has reduced biodiversity and dramatically shifted people out of production agriculture, Nagengast said. In the United States, he pointed out, 41 percent of the population was involved in food production in 1900. Today, only about .7 percent of Americans provide the labor to put food on the table.

"Why are so few of us engaged in providing the most basic of human needs?" he asked, explaining that the break in the production-consumption link impacts society from its employment to its ecology. Noting that Kansas once had a thriving apple industry, for example, he said few people today have an awareness of how their food is grown or even where it comes from.

Nagengast asserted that getting more people involved with food production is elemental to a more productive and sustainable system. He cited a growing public desire for locally produced food and pointed out that the number of farmer's markets in the U.S. has risen from 1,755 in 1994 to approximately 7,175 in 2011 with an estimated \$7 billion in local food sales for the year. Encouraging and enabling more farmers to market

directly to the public, he said, is a giant step toward more sustainable agriculture as local and regional food production benefits communities, farmers and consumers.

“There is a way to do it,” Nagengast said of transforming our current food production system, “and we are doing it — but it’s a struggle.”

Increasing regional and local food production is at the top of Nagengast’s answers for the “What can we do?” question. He advocated efforts to encourage everyone to have some role in the production of his or her food. Streamlining and clarifying regulations that affect direct marketing is important, he said, along with maximizing the nutrient density of foods and encouraging farming practices that promote clean air and water. Partnering with other farmers and regional processors — as well as anyone concerned about their food — can help facilitate sustainable food production. And, he added, protecting highly productive farmland is a must.

Regionalizing food production, Nagengast said, can decrease transportation costs and unnecessary processing. Access to locally produced food, along with school-based nutritional and education programs can help improve the health of the next generation of Kansans, he said.

Nagengast refused to lay blame at the feet of his fellow farmers who participate in a more industrialized approach to farming, however: “These are good, hard-working people and we can’t begrudge them their success but we have to ask if the current system is sustainable.”

“Embedded in our current system is enormous waste and that’s not just the food system,” he told the crowd, adding that runaway waste is inherent in energy, health care and other segments of society. An IBM study, he said, found potential for a 25-30 percent increase in food production and water use efficiency. Arable land, water, fossil fuels, fertilizer and other important resources are either in limited or waning supply while technology and human labor resources are increasing. Developing a food production system that considers those factors is a challenge that faces producers and consumers alike.

“There are things we can do every day,” Nagengast suggested. “We don’t have to petition the government to do it. ... We can design a system that increases participation as well as productivity.”

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)