REDEFINING LOCAL:
THE OKLAHOMA FOOD COOPERATIVE

—Courtney White

What does "local" mean exactly when you live on a remote farm or ranch?

It's an important question because no matter where you go today, it seems, "local" is on everybody's lips—and for good reason. Its many advantages address some of the most pressing problems of our time: it gives us access to fresh, healthy food in an economy dominated by industrial agriculture; it reduces our carbon footprint and lessens our dependence on fossil fuels (both of which help fight global warming); it keeps money circulating in the local economy where its multiplier effect can be significant; it builds a sense of community among all participants; and it pokes globalization in the eye.

But when we talk about "local" we almost always do so from the perspective of the urban dweller, i.e., those products grown or made closest to the customer. Farmers' markets are a good example. "Local" in their case means a radius around a point located in a city or suburb. This means it is self-selecting—it is limited to those farms and ranches that consider themselves to be "local enough" to afford the drive into town every weekend. In other words, from the perspective of a city resident, any farmer selling produce in-person is a "local."

But this begs a question: what about all the producers who are not able to make it to a farmers' market but would like to?

If you live on a remote farm or ranch, especially out West where the distances to potential markets can be staggering, "local" looks very different. You might be able to sell your products in the nearest small town, but this market is likely to be limited in the long run, especially as competition with neighbors and diesel prices rise. If a bigger market exists two hours away instead, does that constitute "local"? It's a significant conundrum for many rural residents. Without a Santa Fe or Denver or Portland nearby, how can an organic farmer or grassfed beef rancher participate in the burgeoning local food and crafts movement and reap its benefits, especially its profits, if he or she lives way out in the Back Forty?

Fortunately, the Oklahoma Food Cooperative has come up with an ingenious solution. I think everyone should take a look at what they've accomplished, as I did when I recently drove to western Oklahoma for a tour organized by a few of the producers in the Cooperative. What they've come up with is innovative, effective, and (so far) successful. When the Cooperative began in 2003, they took thirty-six orders for $3200 in sales. By 2006, it had grown to 900 members. Today, it has over 2000 members and does $500,000 in annual sales (though sales have slipped recently).

The key to the Cooperative's success was a radical idea: they redefined "local" to include the entire state—with significant help from the Internet.

Here's what I knew about the Cooperative's model before venturing on my field trip:

All products provided by the Cooperative are made within the state of Oklahoma.

On the first day of every month, members can go on the Cooperative's web site and purchase any food or craft product listed.

On the second Thursday, this electronic ordering 'window' closes. The orders are then sent to the participating farms and ranches so they can be filled.

On the third Thursday of the month, designated drivers visit all the participating farms and ranches to pick up the orders.

All drivers then converge at a warehouse in Oklahoma City where the products are separated into piles and then rebundled according to the customer's orders.

The drivers drive back home, dropping off the individual orders at designated locations, where the customers pick them up.

Here are more details:

- The one-time membership fee is $52—the same for producers and customers.
- Each farm and ranch creates their own page on the Cooperative's web site; each sets their own price for their products; each designs its own label and controls the advertising, and each is in charge of monthly inventory.
- Customers can buy as much or as little as they want each month; the purchase is made through the Cooperative; and customers can earn credits toward a purchase by volunteering for the organization.
- The Cooperative pays every farmer and rancher **90 cents** of every dollar spent by the customer; the other 10 cents supports the Cooperative, which also adds a 10% mark-up on all products (combined, this 20 cents covers the operating expenses of the organization).

Let me repeat that second-to-last point: *all farmers and ranchers get 90 cents of every dollar spent on their products*. In the industrial agricultural model that dominates food production today, producers typically get **19 cents** of every food dollar. The rest goes to 'middle men,' including packers, truckers, grocery stores, and other corporate interests. This is one of the reasons why farmers and ranchers have struggled with profitability over the decades—not only are they required to be 'cost-takers' from a corporate system that dictates prices for their products (such as feedlot beef), the few alternatives available to them to increase their 'cut' of every food dollar (such as farmer's markets), have their own challenges.

Of course, it's a little more complicated than this rosy picture suggests. Of the 90 cents of every dollar that each farmer or rancher earns through the Cooperative, a portion must go to 'middle men' anyway, including processing, transportation, advertising, and other costs associated with doing business. Still, most Cooperative producers come out ahead because, for a change, they are now 'price givers' instead of 'price-takers.' They can set their own prices and control, to a certain degree, their costs. This is something relatively new under the sun, and one of the reasons I made the long drive from Santa Fe to check it out.

Another reason was the impressive list of products available each month to members. There are nearly 2000 items on the Cooperative's web site, all made in Oklahoma, and many organic, natural, or grassfed. A sampling of items include: bakery, beverages, candy, canned foods, condiments, dairy and eggs, entrees, fruits, gift boxes, grains, flours and pastas, herbs, jam and jelly, meats, natural sweeteners, nuts, poultry, prepared foods, side dishes, and vegetables. Also: apparel, art, baby products, bath and beauty supplies, books, classes, fiber arts, fishing supplies, health items, jewelry, laundry care, garden supplies, live plants, and seeds.

The Cooperative's model differs in important ways from traditional methods of obtaining local products. For example, members can order what they want, when they want it, and what they can afford, which means they are not 'locked in' into the weekly produce list of, say, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm. No more kale and bok choy this week, thanks! For producers, participation in the Cooperative means making only one trip a month into town (and only then if they are a designated driver) instead of the weekly trips required by the farmers' market model. Not only is this easier on the farmer, it's easier on the planet too.

One downside to the Cooperative's model, however, is less face-to-face interaction between producers and customers. In both the CSA and farmers' market models, the meet-and-greet relationship between grower and eater is an important part of doing business. By contrast, by working through the Internet, as the Oklahoma Food Cooperative does, growers and eaters don't get much face time (a big problem with the Internet in general, in my opinion).

But for remote farmers and ranchers, this downside is offset by a big upside: they get to participate in a "local" food economy. By offering products for sale via the Internet at a one-stop shop provided by the Cooperative, and then driving to a central hub to distribute the goods, "local" is extended to the state line. Suddenly, "remote" doesn't seem so remote anymore.

It's not as crazy as it sounds. In fact, it's part of a trend. According to the USDA's recent Census of Agriculture, the value of direct farm sales increased 167% between 2002 and 2007, which also listed 3194 farmers as offering direct sales to consumers. How many of these farmers are involved in a Cooperative-like enterprise isn't clear. But the trend line is definitely upward.

This is great news, and that's another reason I drove to western Oklahoma: to see hope in action. And I found what I was looking for on the very first stop of the tour.

It was a small farm a mile or so north of Fairview called *Cattle Tracks*, a certified organic wheat farm and grassfed beef operation, owned by John and Kris Gosney. Their story was typical of the 125 producer members of the Cooperative. Not long ago, John was a conventional wheat farmer, soaking his fields with pesticides, harvesting the wheat with a ton of fossil fuel, and watching his spirit decline along with the land's

health. He became depressed, he told the tour group, often finding himself sitting on a bale of hay wondering where his life was heading.

John said that he never gave organic a thought until a neighbor asked him to take over his farm, as he was about to retire and didn't want to let his hard work developing an organic wheat operation to come to naught. John was immediately struck by the profitability of his neighbor's farm and decided to certify his own farm as organic as well. He saw a drop in yield initially, but he also saw a drop in expenses, especially since he stopped using conventional fertilizers and pesticides. Eventually, as the yield came up, so did his profits.

However, the main benefit of the switch, he said, was non-economic: he began to have fun again. Going organic cured him of his depression, he explained. He liked the challenge of organic as well as the hard work it requires. A recent musk thistle invasion, for example, necessitates that he spend at least an hour a day with a shovel eradicating the plants. Under the conventional model, of course, he would have sprayed herbicide on the baleful weed.

Farmers are learning much that is invaluable about this tropical world and its reactions to a whole new set of agricultural rules.

Today, John and Kris grow cattle to 800 pounds on their wheat fields and finish them on native grass (an all-wheat diet affects the taste of the meat, he said). In addition to selling his products through the Cooperative, an organic restaurant in Oklahoma City called *Sage* takes their beef. He proudly pointed to a recent analysis by Oklahoma State University of the CLA (conjugated linoleic acid—a cancer-fighter) content of *Cattle Tracks* beef. According to the analysis it fell "in the highest range of CLA content reported in the literature for beef."

He also spoke at length about his latest project: brewing microbes. Repeated applications of herbicides and pesticides on his farmland over the decades had effectively destroyed the microbiotic life of the soil. To remedy this, he brewed microbes in a big container in his barn and sprayed them on the land—restoring the natural fertility of the soil organically. And as he talked, it was evident to all how pleased and excited he was with this work.

After the formal question-and-answer period was done, I stepped up to the small table and brought up the topic of his depression. "What exactly," I asked him, "makes you happy about organic farming?" He paused and turned inward for a moment. "I feel like I'm finally doing God's work," he said quietly. It was a sentiment, I learned, shared by many on the tour.

To me, John's story is a great example of old-fashioned American know-how in action—applied in this case to the cause of organic farming instead of industrial agriculture. This practical, can-do attitude of farmers, much vaunted over the decades by politicians and others as quintessentially American, was much in evidence on the tour. In fact, it describes the Oklahoma Food Cooperative as well—a positive example of American ingenuity at work. Unfortunately, when we talk about American know-how today, it is almost always in the context of high technology. Rarely is it discussed in the context of "low" technology—such as local food systems or organic farming. This is a shame because I believe a great deal of innovative American know-how is alive and well on the Back Forty—and we should give it a closer look.

I traveled to the next stop on the tour with Kim Barker, a rancher and one of the founders and organizers of the Cooperative. He told me that the Cooperative, while effective, isn't a cure-all for remote farms and ranches. In fact, some Cooperative members still drive long distances to farmers' markets on weekends to sell their products. It's all part of what needs to be done, he said, to make a living as a direct marketer of local food.

He filled me in on some of the future plans for the Cooperative:

- The Board wants to move to a faster cycle: twice a month distribution.
- They want more veggie producers.
- They need to bring transportation costs down somehow.
- Using Oklahoma City as a hub is good, but they may look at regional hubs too at some point.
- They want to encourage farmers and ranchers to diversify (Kim recently added chickens and eggs to his product list).
- Their rapid growth means the Cooperative will need a general manager soon (currently it is an almost all-volunteer effort).
- They've been approached by farmers and ranchers in other states curious about the model. And they've begun to share what they've learned.

Kim is careful to point out that the Oklahoma Food Cooperative is a producer ***and*** consumer cooperative—not just a collection of farmers and ranchers. In fact, the initial idea for the Cooperative came from Robert Waldrop, a "foodie" in Oklahoma City who had a vision for a virtual marketplace that was also locally based. He also had an extensive email list! Today he still serves as president of the enterprise.

"Among our producer and customer members we find a diversity of lifestyles, beliefs, cultures, and religions," writes Waldrop on the Cooperative's web site. "Even so, we find common ground based on our mutual need for a marketplace where we can find good, healthy, nutritious local foods. We are focused on meeting local needs with local resources."

They have succeeded so far because their eyes are firmly

fixed on a vision of community, social justice, environmental sustainability, and economically viable local food systems. That vision continues to sustain the cooperative today. And as I mentioned earlier, I'm certain this model can be replicated in any region where there is a need to redefine "local" to include remote farmers and ranchers. Thanks to Oklahoma Food Cooperative, this vision has become a reality.

Or as Robert Waldrop likes to say: "Y'all bon apetite, you hear?"

A former archaeologist and Sierra Club activist, Courtney White voluntarily dropped out of the 'conflict industry' in 1997 to co-found The Quivira Coalition, *a nonprofit organization dedicated to building bridges between ranchers, conservationists, public land managers, scientists, and others. He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with his family and a backyard full of chickens. This essay is part of a series called "The Back Forty." For more of Courtney's writings visit his website: www.awestthatworks.com.*