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W.Va. farmers discuss process of getting their food to local tables

May 13, 2011 | By RICHARD F. BELISLE | richardb@herald-mail.com

MARTINSBURG, W.Va. — Beef cattle graze in abundance in fields around Betsy Heath's restaurant but they don't end up on her customers' plates.

Heath and her husband, Damian, own Lot 12 Public House, an upscale eatery at 117 Warren St. in Berkeley Springs, W.Va.

The Heaths were among 15 area small farmers, restaurant owners, grocers and government officials that U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., convened Friday for a roundtable discussion on how to connect growers with consumers looking to buy locally-produced food.

Betsy Heath buys 75 percent of the produce for her restaurant locally in season.

"Buying local beef is a big challenge," she said.

Beef is grown locally but it's difficult to get it to a local processor and then to her kitchen unless she buys a whole cow and has it butchered to her specifications, she said.

Friday's panel — held in the barn at the Berkeley County Poor Farm — also touched on boosting production to cut the cost of what the senator called "farm-to-fork," difficulties starting a small farm operation, securing financing and cutting red tape.

While West Virginia has more than 23,000 small farms, "90 percent of the \$6.6 million we spend on food each a year comes from outside the state. By promoting access to local goods right here in West Virginia, we can keep more of our food dollars in our own communities," he said.

The panel included area farmers Derek Kilmer, Katy Orr-Dove, Laura Glascock, Dave Elliott and Billy Madert.

Also participating were Tres Bailey, senior manager of agriculture and food for Wal-Mart Stores Inc., which tries to buy local produce; state Deputy Commissioner of Agriculture Bob Tabb of Jefferson County; Alfred Lewis of the West Virginia University Extension Service; and Savanna Lyons, program manager for the fledgling West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition.

"Pessimists don't plant seeds," Tabb said. "Farmers have to be optimists. Farming is not an occupation. It's a way of life."

According to Rockefeller, the Eastern Panhandle has lost more than 100,000 acres of farmland to developers.

Kilmer, whose family owns Kilmer's Farm Market in Berkeley County, said much of his fruit is sold to area school districts and the VA Medical Center in Martinsburg.

Orr-Dove said 85 percent of the fruits and vegetables grown on her Berkeley County family farm goes to the wholesale market.

Farmers like Glascock of Morgan County, W.Va., and Elliott of Hedgesville, W.Va., sell their produce at area farm markets. Elliott pointed to the need to open more markets for small farmers.

"Wal-Mart probably buys 1,000 cases of lettuce at a time. I can grow 10 cases but how do I get my 10 into their 1,000 cases?" Elliott asked.

"Up to the 1950s, small farms in New Jersey used to feed all of Manhattan and Philadelphia," Rockefeller said. "Earl Butz (agriculture secretary in President Nixon's administration) changed all that. His philosophy was to have all farms get bigger and bigger."

Billy Madert and a friend, both former city dwellers, consider themselves to be first-generation farmers.

Their "rocky," six-acre Blue Morning Farm near Shepherdstown, W.Va., grows vegetables in a consumer-supported agriculture operation. In its third year, more than 50 customers have signed contracts to have Madert and his partner supply them with fresh vegetables delivered to their homes every week during the growing season.

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Rockefeller, chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce Science and Transportation, has held three previous “Make it in America” roundtable discussions across the state.