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By Kevin Opsahl staff writer Sep 22, 2017

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USU Assistant Professor Kelsey Hall has been appointed to Utah's Local Food Advisory Council.

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USU Assistant Professor Kelsey Hall is no stranger to locally-produced food. Her father owned a farm in her native Ohio and she has memories of cooking in the kitchen with her mom.

“I picked up the smell, the texture, the freshness of the food,” Hall said. “Knowing that I was helping to produce that food we were eating really excited me as a child. They were local products.”

Hall’s interest in growing her own food carried on through college and into a career in academia, measuring consumers’ attitudes and purchasing behavior regarding locally-grown products.

More recently, the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food announced Hall has been named a member of Utah’s Local Food Advisory Council, created by legislation signed into law earlier this year.

The council’s purpose is to foster the state’s local food economy. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Agriculture say 10 percent of Utah’s farms sell directly to the public — several percentage points above the national average.

The council hopes to help the local food economy in a number of ways, including making sure local money stays in communities as well as preserving open space and family owned farms. It will also assess laws and regulations regarding the direct sale of locally-grown food.

The council met for the first time at Wheeler Farm in Murray on Sept. 21.

Hall talked about local food and the issues facing the council in a recent Herald Journal interview.

**Q:** What is the definition of “local food”?

**A:** The U.S. Department of Agriculture does not have an official definition. So, I think when I define “local food,” there’s a lot of different components to it. Local food can be products — whether that be fruits, vegetables, dairies, meats, value-added products like salsa and jams — that are produced within a certain mileage or distance from your state. For us, as a board, we’re looking at it in terms of our state — what are the products we are producing within the state of Utah?

**Q:** “Local” could be outside of Utah?

**A:** It can be. If I’m in Moab, would it be local if I drive 50 miles into Colorado? Maybe, because it’s closer than Logan, Utah. That’s where it’s really kind of tricky.

That’s why we haven’t really defined it as a specific definition in the USDA. But I would definitely say, as a council (the definition is) the products grown in our state.

**Q:** How would you describe the local food economy in Utah?

**A:** I’d describe it as an economy that has not yet reached the demand our consumers have because we have over 40 farmers’ markets, around 30 community-supported agriculture programs, farmers and ranchers that will sell to restaurants and to our grocery stores. But we have a lot of opportunities to help others be able to do more community-supported agriculture, be able to grow the number of vendors at farmers’ markets, offer schools the opportunity to source more locally.

**Q:** So while Utah’s local food economy is diverse, there is room for growth?

**A:** Yes. We're not meeting the consumer demand right now for what is being asked, a lot of times, in that Wasatch Front area for local products — eggs, cheese, vegetables, meats — that they want. So that's where I think there's a way to work with our farmers and ranchers at helping them do that if they're interested in it.

**Q:** Why do you think Utahns have such demand for locally-produced food?

**A:** They want fresh produce that's seasonal, they want to know where their food comes from, who is growing that food; they want to support a local economy, they want to support local farms.

Sometimes, it's also for their families to experience what life might be at a farm because they go into a farm store and that's a chance for them to see agriculture because very few are actually employed as farmers and ranchers in the United States — 2 percent produces our food — so there is a lot of disconnect as consumer.

I think those are big reasons.

**Q:** Why do you think a board focusing on Utah local food is needed?

**A:** I think we want to preserve our farmland in Utah. We want to make sure we have good rules and regulations that will allow our farmers and ranchers to grow products. We want to meet the demand of our consumers for locally produced products.

I think we can come together as a large committee of a lot of different backgrounds and look at local food in a very holistic picture and what we need to do that would allow us to expand our local food movement and meet that consumer demand.

By working with farmers, farm organizations, our government agencies, our university and representatives, we can look at those issues and identify things we need to do in our state and be able to work over the next several years on those tasks.

**Q:** Was there a suggestion at the first meeting you made, someone else made, that was particularly relevant to the local food economy in Cache Valley?

**A:** Access to farmland. One thing that really intrigued me was learning about how Salt Lake County and Salt Lake City leases out city and county land that's not used at the moment to growers so they can produce. That's wonderful for first-time growers that have never done this.

I don't know if Cache County could offer unused land for lease for growers. It is one way we could help first-generation farmers with getting access to farmland, because that is a big challenge for expanding the local food movement.

**Q:** Do you remember eating locally produced food for the first time?

**A:** I got my passion for agriculture on my Dad's side of the family. They farmed in Ohio. I learned about corn, soy beans, meat and hay. We always grew vegetables and had a really large garden.

**Q:** Could you taste the difference between local and grocery store?

**A:** That's a good question. Yes, I could always taste a fresh, ripened tomato from my backyard. Or fresh sweet corn we picked from the garden.

I continued that all through high school and then in college, at Ohio State University, I had a small garden plot on campus. I couldn't go back home very easily.

**Q:** Sounds like you're walking the walk when it comes to local produce.

**A:** Yes. I want to make sure I support local farmers because that's my area of research. I can learn from them, build relationships with them, learn how they make bread or grow their produce. Those are special stories that you can share with consumers.

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