For Mary Lou Fitzgerald, a resident member of the Green Pastures Senior Cooperative in Redmond, Ore., a resident-owned manufactured housing cooperative was a perfect option. “It’s an ideal environment. It’s safe, secure and all of the people are retired or almost retired,” she says. “It’s a peaceful area — a peaceful environment.”

Fitzgerald said she values the sense of community and appreciates that while she can live independently, neighbors are close enough to look out for each other. “I have a good friend that lives just across the street from me. She keeps an eye on my house and when I open my window blinds, she knows I’m up and about.”

Control of land needed for stability

Oregon’s 1,090 manufactured housing parks — equaling about 62,656 spaces — represents a large portion of the state’s affordable housing stock. Parks for seniors account for nearly 30 percent of the total. True stability cannot be achieved, however, unless residents also control the land under their homes through cooperative ownership.

To date, seven manufactured housing cooperatives in Oregon have been established with the assistance of CASA of Oregon, a Certified Technical Assistance Provider under the ROC USA Network. Each of these seven cooperatives, representing 431 manufactured housing spaces, has gone on to purchase and successfully operate their manufactured housing community cooperative, with ongoing technical assistance from CASA of Oregon.

Five of the seven communities are located in rural areas. Agricultural workers account for a majority of the members in two of them.

In addition to benefitting from stabilized housing and affordability, as cooperative owners of their communities, members of manufactured housing co-ops are able to make significant health and safety improvements to existing infrastructure. Because they have formed nonprofit cooperatives, excess revenue from site rents is reinvested back into the community.

Moreover, the cooperatives are able to hire local contractors, keeping their investments truly “local.”

Co-op improves community infrastructure

The Vida Lea Community Cooperative in Leaburg, Ore., purchased a manufactured housing park in 2012. It then converted its financing to a permanent loan in 2014, following an extensive capital-improvement effort that cost more than $250,000.

Dan Fountain, the cooperative’s board president, beams with pride when he describes the new, improved community. “When we bought the park, the infrastructure was old and deteriorated. As the new owners, we were able to replace the 30-year-old pump on our water system and paint the water storage tank,” he says.

The co-op also upgraded the septic system and added four new septic tanks. “We paved the roads and added a much-needed surface training system,” Fountain adds. “With a lot of tree trimming and tree removal, our park looks better than it ever has looked.”

The Bella Vista Estates Cooperative in Boardman, Ore., which converted to resident ownership in January 2014, fulfills a particular need in the region: ensuring that residents, many of whom are agricultural workers, are able secure affordable housing near their places of work.

Clarissa Jimenez, co-op board secretary, says: “We are excited to have accomplished this goal for the benefit of the hardworking families in our manufactured housing community.”

Back from the Brink

Grocery co-op conversion prevents food desert in rural Wisconsin

By Megan Webster, Outreach Specialist, and Courtney Berner, Co-op Development Specialist, University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives

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The rural, family-owned grocery store is increasingly an endangered species in many parts of the United States. Challenges such as competition from “big box” and chain stores, changes in America’s shopping and commuting patterns, and rural-to-urban migration have all led to the closing of many rural grocery stores.

Rural communities that have

Phil’s Supermarket in Plain, Wis., was slated for closure, but has been converted into a consumer-owned grocery cooperative, keeping alive the nearly century-long tradition of providing food to Plain and the surrounding communities.
suffered this phenomenon are often called “food deserts,” which the United States Department of Agriculture defines as areas “without ready access to fresh, healthy and affordable food.” This is not a strictly rural phenomenon, as many food deserts also exist in low-income urban areas.

Local grocery stores are integral to keeping rural communities and economies vibrant, not only by providing access to food, but also by providing employment and tax revenue. The cooperative model is one possible tool that rural communities can use to keep their local grocery store in town.

Store on brink of closure

Residents of Plain, a town of 792 in southwest Wisconsin, fought the prospect of becoming a food desert when the owners of Phil’s River Valley Supermarket decided it was time to sell the family business, ending nearly 95 years in operation. With the help of the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives (UWCC), the community successfully converted Phil’s Supermarket to a consumer-owned grocery cooperative, keeping alive the nearly century-long tradition of providing food to Plain and the surrounding communities.

Courtney Berner, cooperative development specialist at UWCC, supported the conversion process from start to finish. She noted that a strong commitment from the local community kept the project moving forward during the nearly yearlong conversion process.

The interim board of directors, made up of local residents, led the process of incorporating as a legal entity and developing bylaws, implementing a survey, recruiting new members, securing member loans and hiring a general manager. Community engagement continued at the first annual meeting, with a very active electoral process for the first member-elected board of directors.

Honey Creek Market Cooperative officially began operating the store in August 2013 and has had a busy first year. Since the grand opening in October 2013, the cooperative has organized Plain’s first farmers market, teamed up with a local coffee roaster to carry its own blend of coffee, launched catering services and implemented a member-reward system. Honey Creek continues to support and promote local and organic foods.

A 100-year business model

Honey Creek has now turned its attention to building a financially sustainable business that will serve the community of Plain for the next 100 years. Like all rural grocery cooperatives, the success of Honey Creek Market Cooperative will depend on members’ support at the cash register.

“Honey Creek Market currently has 242 members. It was estimated that to maintain its success in coming years, the store will need at least 300 members who spend an average of $50 per week at the co-op,” says Tegan Krueger, Honey Creek’s store manager. “We’re looking forward to growing our membership” What’s next? “The main goal of Honey Creek Market Cooperative, stated simply, remains what it has been since our beginning one year ago: ‘To provide to the members, and the community, high-quality products and services at affordable prices,’” says David Buchanan, the co-op’s board president. “In 2015, our goals are to increase membership, increase sales with member and community participation and refine inventory selection.”

Co-op leaders are committed to keeping the market as a center of community activity that promotes local and regional food production, keeps capital and jobs in their area and that is committed to sustainable practices.

For more information, visit the co-op’s website at: www.hcmcoop.com.

Soup’s On!

Stone Soup Farm Co-op part of worker-owned farm trend

By Rebecca Everett

Editor’s note: This article is reprinted courtesy of the Daily Hampshire Gazette, originally published April 14, 2014.

Most farmers will tell you that cooperation is crucial to keeping a farm running like a well-oiled threshing machine. But at Stone Soup Farm Cooperative in Hadley, Mass., cooperation is everything.

Four young farmers formed the worker-owned farm collective in the fall of 2013 and have been working to grow greenhouse vegetables and raise chickens since. Susanna Harro, 24, David DiLorenzo, 26, Amanda Barnett, 29, and Jarrett Man, 30, are owners, as well as employees, at the 81 Rocky Hill Road co-op.

Stone Soup Farm Cooperative is probably the first worker-owned farm co-op in the state, says Lynda Brushett, of the Cooperative Development Institute, which advises people in the agricultural, fisheries and food industries on starting cooperatives.

“We’re sharing the risk and the rewards,” DiLorenzo said while the four talked and munched on spinach leaves in one of their greenhouses. “That’s just a good way to live.”

They decided to start the co-op for numerous reasons, including the lure of...