Routing foods into southeast Iowa

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Can local farmers use a joint enterprise to share marketing and sales services for local produce?

Examples from other parts of the country showed that business models on comparable levels had been successful and could be explored further.

Background

Farmers in the project area currently supply fresh produce, meat and dairy products through individual sales and farmers’ market events to individuals and families. These products could be marketed to larger institutions through a combined effort of marketing and sales, allowing greater public access to fresh, local food, and increasing the viability for these small farms to scale up production while increasing the possibility of developing a year-round supply of local foods.

The original project objectives were to:

• Assess interest of participation from Buy Fresh Buy Local/Hometown Harvest of Southeast Iowa networked producers;
• Gauge interest from buyers including restaurateurs and major grocers in Wapello, Mahaska and Jefferson counties (i.e., all Hy-Vee stores, restaurants grossing $100,000+ annually); and
• Determine the feasibility of a cooperative farmer-owned brokerage.

Approach and methods

The scope of work included researching existing farmer-based networks to identify workable, scalable enterprises that would shape or fit the local food region. The organizations that were studied include: White Dog Enterprises, GROWN Locally, Woodbury Farm Foods Cooperative, the Oklahoma Food Cooperative, Wholesome Harvest, Organic Valley, the Iowa Food Cooperative and Red Tomato.

The idea of pooling the marketing enterprise was presented and discussed with growers across Hometown Harvest’s six-county region. Interested growers were invited to further discussions and to meet with other interested growers.

The co-investigator met with assisted living centers, hospitals and restaurants to assess their interest in local food purchasing. One restaurant, one assisted living facility, and one hospital, as well as two school districts wished to actively pursue possibilities in local food purchasing.
Results and discussion

In assessing the interest in participation from Buy Fresh Buy Local and Hometown Harvest networked producers, Humble attended farmers market meetings in three counties (the three counties did not have organized farmers market meetings) to talk about the project and its possible outcomes. Growers who expressed interest in learning more about the project and possibly participating in the project were noted and were kept informed about the project’s progress.

Carter, the co-investigator, contacted the purchasing institutions to assess their interest in purchasing local food. She organized a round-table event with assisted living centers and hospitals from around the region to talk about purchasing local foods. The event allowed the institutions to ask questions and learn more about the process and mechanics of local food purchases.

Feasibility was determined during meetings with farms that had remained involved with the project throughout its duration. The investigators found that creating a farmer-owned enterprise to share marketing and selling services was an achievable venture for southeast Iowa. Of the several cooperative models that were examined, resources, operational procedures, and the population served all were taken into consideration to find the organizational model that best fit the regional capacity.

Conclusions

With larger institutions such as schools, hospitals, and assisted living centers showing interest in purchasing local food, it was determined that founding a multi-farm enterprise is indeed feasible. The grassroots-based and rurally-located GROWN Locally was found to be the best model for an emerging enterprise in southeast Iowa due to the greatest similarity in number of farms, population served, and beginning resources for the proposed enterprise. As an additional bonus, GROWN Locally is located in northeast Iowa and was willing to help mentor the group. (For more information on GROWN Locally, see http://www.grownlocally.com/)

To help increase the value of the work, a projected dollar amount of purchases from the institutions would have been helpful in recruiting more farms to the project, as well as a list of items and amount of items that the institutions estimate they would purchase.

Impact of results

Grower interest and interest from purchasing institutions were assessed and feasibility of production and sales was determined by the participating firms. With time and additional development efforts, there will be more examples of multi-farm enterprises that focus on specialty crop and niche meat production. Results from this project can be used as an example of potential methods used to determine feasibility for creating multi-farm enterprises.
Leveraged funds

No additional funds were leveraged by this project.

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