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Convening the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG)

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Convening the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG)

Abstract

This project continued the convening of the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) while developing best practices of members and leaders of the steering committee and setting the stage for further activities.

Keywords

Community-based food systems

Disciplines

International and Community Nutrition



Convening the Regional Food Systems Working Group

Abstract: This project continued the convening of the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) while developing best practices of members and leaders of the steering committee and setting the stage for further activities.

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\$35,607 for years one
and two

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Q What could be done to sustain and measure the impact of a vital Iowa network for local food system development?

A The network continues under the leadership of the Iowa Food and Farm Plan Initiative and documented its economic impact in two consecutive year surveys. Results published as 2012 Economic Impacts of Iowa's Regional Food Systems Working Group and 2013 Economic Impacts of Iowa's Regional Food Systems Working Group.

Background

Established in 2003, the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) is a state-wide umbrella network for all Iowans working to build a more resilient regional food system. RFSWG is comprised of 15 geographically based groups called regional food groups that reach 90 Iowa counties. Each regional food group works with different stakeholders—farmers, food-based businesses, non-profits, ISU Extension, RC&Ds, educational institutions and government agencies—to support local food systems development in their region.

Leopold Center funding since the RFSWG was formed has provided continuous opportunities for the network to share best practices, collaborate on projects and grow the local foods movement in Iowa. The statewide networking group has helped focus local and state attention on local foods as an economic and community tool to rebuild rural Iowa and create healthier communities.

The objectives of this grant are to:

- Develop a process for continuous learning via a learning community that would facilitate and create opportunities for communication and networking among the various RFSWG participants and their key value chain partners to build a more vibrant and resilient food system.
- Articulate the value of such a network, thereby laying the foundation for fiscal sustainability and positioning the state to conduct a food and farm business asset mapping project.
- Produce a collaborative framework for continued and sustainable future convening of RFSWG, providing resiliency to the food system landscape in Iowa.

Results and discussion

Community of Practice

The RFSWG maintains a unified working group of local food advocates who share the values of regional, community food systems. Quarterly meetings were consistently attended by an average of 50 participants. Meeting attendees traveled to central Iowa



MARKETING



RFSWG Steering Team,
August 2013

from all parts of the state, on their own time. Evaluations repeatedly demonstrated the value for attendees to participate in the meeting and network with their peers. The working group also maintains a virtual discussion board, open to all, where questions, needs and announcements are shared. These continued interactions build trusting, reliable relationships that often result in new partnerships, projects and dollars leveraged. Results of these relationships were documented in the 2012 publication *Creating Change in the Food System: The Role of Regional Food Networks in Iowa*. (get link on the RFSWG page: www.leopold.iastate.edu/regional-food-systems-working-group).

Participants rated usefulness of the meeting content/information at 4.4 out of 5 (on average). Evaluations also provided topic suggestions for future meetings. RFSWG participants were eager to have current, accurate information to improve their work within their region. The RFSWG steering committee identified a need for more technical, professional development for the regional coordinators and the partners of the network.

An orientation packet and an Assistant Coordinator available for phone and email dialogue assisted in building capacity, sustainability and commitment of regional coordinators. The Assistant Coordinator worked with the regional coordinators to orient them to the RFSWG and highlight the importance of their contribution to the group.

Common Indicators

In this last phase of Leopold Center funding, the steering committee set out to construct and implement an evaluation of the RFSWG work. Collectively, the core stakeholders and project evaluator, Corry Bregendahl, narrowed the evaluation focus to economic indicators, identified by farmer sales, institutional purchases, job creation, and dollars leveraged from the regional coordinators.

Grant funds supported stipends for regional coordinators to collect a baseline number of surveys. The surveys, conducted in April 2013 and 2014, requested data from the previous calendar year.

There is strong evidence that regions were successful in collecting sensitive data, such as sales and purchases, due to their trusting relationships with regional contacts. Without these relationships the economic impact of local foods production and sales would not be reported.

The results of the data collection on economic indicators by the RFSWG regional coordinators are documented in the publication, *2012 Economic Impacts of Iowa's Regional Food Systems Working Group Working Group* and *2013 Economic Impacts of Iowa's Regional Food Systems Working Group* (find both reports at www.leopold.iastate.edu/local-food). Individual regional reports also were generated, featuring a champion of local foods from each contributing region.

The regional coordinators' experiences of data collection and reporting have given them skills for evaluating and monitoring their regional programming. The media attention also demonstrates the value of monitoring this work and showing the value of these efforts.

Sustainability

The steering committee was successful in creating a cooperative alliance of strategic partners to sustain the core functions of the RFSWG network. Strategic partners include the Leopold Center, Iowa Food System Council, SARE, and the League of RC&Ds. In addition to the core functions, the steering committee sought to maintain the RFSWG Assistant Coordinator role. This role is vital to the organization and support of the regional coordinators. The value of this role was demonstrated in the reallocation of the grant budget, from coordinator stipends for travel and data collection to the funding for a quarter-time coordinator. A proposal was presented and approved by the Local Food and Farm Initiative (LFFI) Advisory Council for the LFFI Assistant Coordinator to assume the role of the RFSWG Assistant Coordinator, folding these duties into the current position.

Conclusions

This project confirms the value of RFSWG in the development of the Iowa food system and the need to continue its work. The established metrics for measuring economic impacts of RFSWG are an important part of telling the story of food system development. Iowa will continue to benefit from RFSWG as an active player in the development of effective food systems strategies and monitoring the effects. Specific recommendations are:

FUNDING

- Secure funding for regional local food coordinators. Continue to seek public and private dollars for collective projects among the regions. Provide strong letters of support for regions that seek funding. Encourage regions in their management of fundraising and strategic planning efforts.
- Assemble annual funding to support a full-time RFSWG coordinator. In addition to continuing to convene the network and to support documentation of economic indicators, this position also could provide technical assistance and advise regional coordinators, and collaborate to identify, develop and support key food projects in the state. The position would be most successful if integrated into an organization that can offer administrative and political support.

DEVELOPMENT

- Offer professional development training opportunities to regional coordinators and partners on identified areas of need. Training for mentors or job-shadowing opportunities will build skills and competency in less adept local food coordinators.

COORDINATION

- Create a ‘statewide leaders’ collaborative to share information among the organizations operating statewide, create statewide plans to address emerging issues and opportunities, and develop an annual legislative advocacy agenda.
- Plan and implement semi-annual mapping of regional assets. A continuous collection of best practices from the regions could build on the knowledge of what is occurring and with what level of success.

Impact of results

The RFSWG remains intact while evolving to its next stage. Stable relationships will allow the group to continue to explore new opportunities. The economic impact evaluation brought attention to RFSWG from media, local partners and legislators. Food system development activities gained credibility for the impact they have on communities, both economically and socially. This new attention strengthened the regional coordinators' work, and drew in new partners and commitment to collaboration.

The evaluation also confirmed the important role of RFSWG in advancing statewide food system efforts. Regional coordinators are sought after to contribute to projects and provide access to regional assets. In the past two years regional coordinators were offered an opportunity to submit Requests for Proposals (RFP) to the AgVenturesAlliance. Additionally, their services were contracted as part of several regional grants. Funders are beginning to commit more grant and public dollars to local food work.

Education and outreach

- In September 2013 the RFSWG coordinators collaborated on a press release highlighting eight regional farm tours and local food celebrations occurring across the state.
- RFSWG participated in three state-level conferences (Women, Food and Agriculture Network, Practical Farmers of Iowa, and the Iowa Local Food Conference) as an exhibitor, distributing the economic brief and sharing the state and regional results.
- The RFSWG Assistant Coordinator presented (remotely) on the RFSWG at the Food Systems Innovation Conference in Burlington, VT in June 2014.
- The economic impact evaluation was covered in 27 reports in newspapers, magazines and on radio.
- The project evaluator has shared information on the economic impact process and results at several national conferences. Three states have inquired about the process and have plans to replicate the economic impact study.

Leveraged funds

Evaluation results showed that the RFSWG regional coordinators leveraged nearly \$800,000 in funding to be used in their region during 2012. The report states that the leveraged funds were used for a variety of purposes including support for local foods coordinators, developing small business planning workshops, creating and enhancing local food markets, strategic planning, establishing school gardens, building greenhouses, improving food processing profitability, transitioning farmers to produce for wholesale markets and more.

The RFSWG as a network leveraged \$10,000 to support a food hub working group project (AgVentures Alliance) and \$5,000 dollars from SARE to conduct two professional development opportunities for the network in 2014-2015.

**For more information,
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