Establishment of a local food system in eastern Iowa

Wendell Jones  
*United States Department of Agriculture*

Jeffrey T. Zacharakis-Jutz  
*Iowa State University*

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Establishment of a local food system in eastern Iowa

Abstract
Several strategies to enhance local food production and marketing were employed by the Johnson County (IA) Soil and Water Conservation District. Among them were a pilot project on institutional buying practices, a directory of local food products, planning of locally sourced "All-Iowa meals," and other educational and outreach activities.

Keywords
Community-based food systems, Market research and feasibility studies

Disciplines
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Abstract: Several strategies to enhance local food production and marketing were employed by the Johnson County (IA) Soil and Water Conservation District. Among them were a pilot project on institutional buying practices, a directory of local food products, planning of locally sourced “All-Iowa meals,” and other educational and outreach activities.

Background

On average, U.S. farmers receive only 22 cents of every dollar spent on food. The remaining 78 cents is devoted to packaging, labor, transportation, depreciation, and marketing. Even in an agricultural state such as Iowa, as much as 90 percent of the fresh produce consumed is estimated to be imported from other states and countries.

One of the ways to help Iowa’s producers retain a greater percentage of the food dollar is to provide more local opportunities where producers and consumers can engage directly in commerce. Estimates are that a local food system, which relies less heavily on marketing, could return 30 cents per food dollar to the farmer (Adding Values to our Food System: An Economic Analysis of Sustainable Community Food Systems, 1997, Everson, Washington; view original document at www.ibiblio.org/farming-connection/foodsyst/addval.htm). Localizing the food supply also gives consumers increased control over how their food dollar is spent. Participation in a local food system allows consumers to reward producers who use environmentally friendly practices with a larger share of the food dollar.

The goal of this project was to foster the organization and growth of a local food system in Johnson County, Iowa, through education, demonstration, and information transfer. Efforts were restricted primarily to Johnson County with some involvement by producers in immediately adjacent counties. Preference was given to small- and medium-scale family owned operations that practiced sound farm management and land stewardship techniques.

Approach and methods

The majority of the project activities were carried out by Carol Hunt, Johnson County Soil and Water Conservation District Local Food Systems Project Coordinator, under the guidance of the principal investigator.

Directory of Local Food Producers—This publication brought together existing information on local food producers and processors, plus new information, in a single, comprehensive source suitable for wide distribution in the community. The directory included information about what type of product was sold, where sales occurred, what the working hours and days were, contact information, etc. Data on producers (farm acreage, production capability, and income from food production) also were compiled. The first entries were solicited in fall and winter 1999. Participating producers were invited to resubmit and revise their entries for directories issued in each of two subsequent years. At the same time new entries were sought to keep the database current. Copies were distributed to businesses, tourist venues, and recreational spots in Iowa City and Coralville.

Principal Investigator:
Wendell Jones
District Conservationist
Natural Resources
Conservation Service
Iowa City

Co-investigators:
Jeffrey Zacharakis-Jutz
Community Development Specialist
ISU Extension
Marion

Budget:
$25,800 for year one
$25,800 for year two
$25,800 for year three
Our goal was to determine whether using a variety of formal and informal education, demonstration, and information transfer strategies was an effective way to build a stronger community-based food system in Johnson County, Iowa. We also wanted to know whether this could materially benefit food producers in the region. We found that diverse efforts placed throughout the community quickly strengthened our local food system at multiple points, and that a number of producers experienced increased commerce and profit as a result. In addition, the positive outcomes of this project have continued and expanded, suggesting that the initial effort and funding invested have acted as a catalyst that will result in “paybacks” for some time to come.

**Institutional/Commercial Buying of Local Food**—Building on an earlier Extension 21 project, a select number of local producers and area chefs were recruited for an institutional buying effort that would serve as a model to test a proposed business plan. The purpose of the business plan was to strategically address issues that would face this group of producers and buyers. These issues included: Ways for buyers to easily identify producers who had products they needed; ways for producers to anticipate and plan for expected needs of buyers; how producers could get a fair price; food quality standards; product packaging, delivery and payment procedures; mechanisms for efficient producer-buyer transactions; and possible business structures (such formation of a co-operative). The goal was to recruit one or two commercial/institutional enterprises each year to commit to buying local food, with a 5 percent increase in the amount of each institution’s food budget spent locally. Additional producers were solicited as interest and need increased. Participants in the project were to keep accurate records to help monitor the financial impact of such local commerce ventures. In addition, the project implemented the serving of several “All-Iowa” meals that advertised and demonstrated the concept of eating locally.

**Public Education and Other Activities**—Initially, several projects and activities were proposed. Among them were quarterly workshops for education and networking and a periodical newsletter to educate the community about local food issues, surveys and questionnaires, and a forum for feedback and information exchange. There was not enough time to carry out all of these activities. However, project organizers found other opportunities and means to disseminate information.

**Results and discussion**

**Directory of Local Food Producers**—Nearly 75 applications were received for inclusion in the first directory. Direct contact with producers generated the greatest response to the call for applications. Newsletter publicity and direct mailings also yielded a good return. Nine thousand copies of the first year’s directory were distributed; 7,500 were handed out the second year. The third edition (with approximately 120 entries) was developed at the end of 2002.

Feedback from users indicated a high level of interest and degree of usefulness. Many people, including restaurant chefs, have reported using the directory to find local foodstuffs. In addition, the directory unexpectedly has functioned as a publicity tool. Newspaper reporters have used the directory to find topics for special interest stories.

**Institutional/Commercial Buying of Local Food**—During the 1999 growing season, participating institutional buyers purchased approximately $14,000 worth of meat and produce from participating producers. In addition, more than $5,000 in sales took place from non-participating producers to participating institutions and from participating producers to non-participating institutions.

News about the project led to inquiries from area producers and institutions, some of which were formally invited to participate in the institutional buying project. In the second year, the number of participating restaurants increased from three to seven. Eleven producers supplied products to them. Sales in the second year were close to $25,000. In 2001, the number of participating producers and restaurants tracked by the project remained the same, but commerce increased to nearly $35,000. At the start of the 2002 growing season, restaurants needed no prodding to resume their purchases from local growers.

In general, participant response to the institutional buying project was very positive. Grow-
ers were pleased to have additional markets for their products; institutional chefs were enthusiastic about the quality of food they purchased locally. The most serious concerns affecting this effort were pricing issues. Most institutions buy their food from wholesalers that have different price structures than small producers, who may not be able to price their products competitively. Many of the producers raised small volumes of food using labor-intensive organic techniques, with correspondingly higher product costs.

Producers were encouraged to set prices that allowed them to earn a fair profit, but it was not possible for producers to agree on a single price that suited them all and that resulted in diminished cooperation among producers. Some producers called for pricing guidelines because they simply were not sure how to set prices on their products. Consumer demand ultimately drives the institutional food market, and this makes public education about the costs of local food production a key factor in building a sustainable local food system.

Public Education and Other Activities—These efforts occupied a large portion of the project coordinator’s time. Participation in public events and workshops was critical. But much time was spent on extensive informal communication with hundreds of groups and individuals including producers, consumers, local food systems activists, and other community members.

Examples of some activities were:

- Developing and staffing an information booth for use at the Iowa City farmers’ market and several other events,
For more information, contact Wendell Jones, 51 Escort Lane, Iowa City, IA 52240-8612, (319) 337-2322, Ext. 3, e-mail wendell.jones@ia.nrcs.usda.gov

- Demonstrations and cooking classes in partnership with New Pioneer Co-op natural food store,
- Presentations at workshops and conferences throughout the Midwest,
- Service on the Local Food System Task Force,
- Coordination of the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture 2001 annual conference, and
- Preparation and presentation of Iowa-grown food for agencies such as ISU Extension, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Johnson County Soil and Water Conservation District, and special interest groups.

Conclusions

Strengthening local food systems in Johnson County could be accomplished through a variety of techniques, some formal and others less so. What was accomplished though the three years of this project serves both as a foundation and catalyst for growth, rather than a final and complete outcome.

Impact of results

Using multiple approaches to consumer education about local, sustainable food systems can result in increased community participation in these systems. If individual and institutional consumers increase their purchases of locally grown foods, local growers will be encouraged to increase production and diversification while maintaining economic, environmental, and social viability.

Education and outreach

Extensive personal communication between the project coordinator and many interested parties was ongoing. Other activities included sharing information via:

- Fifteen conferences and workshops,
- Information booth displayed at several locations (viewed by 3,000-4,000 people),
- Local food cooking classes and demonstrations (1,000 people attended),
- Forty catered meals (1,600 people served), and
- Interviews with area newspapers, radio stations, and public television outlets.