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Planning grant for expansion of Food Alliance ecolabel program in Iowa

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Planning grant for expansion of Food Alliance ecolabel program in Iowa

Abstract

Food Alliance Midwest has established certification programs in Minnesota and Wisconsin to indicate when products were grown using environmentally and socially responsible practices. This project considered how to expand the certification process to Iowa.

Keywords

Market research and feasibility studies

Disciplines

Agribusiness | Agriculture



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Abstract: Food Alliance Midwest has established certification programs in Minnesota and Wisconsin to indicate when products were grown using environmentally and socially responsible practices. This project considered how to expand the certification process to Iowa.

Question & Answer

Q: Is there a way to coordinate the marketing efforts of all types of niche products produced in Iowa and supplement each other's efforts?

A: Food Alliance Midwest could be the vehicle that would cross all types of products that are produced in Iowa. It has a recognizable presence across the United States and its value could be leveraged across many of the niche food products that are produced in Iowa today.

Background

The Iowa Institute for Cooperatives (IIC), in partnership with Food Alliance Midwest (FAM) which is based in Minnesota, sought to research and develop a plan for the expansion of Food Alliance certification throughout Iowa. (Food Alliance operates a program that certifies agricultural producers for their environmentally and socially responsible growing practices.)

Past experience has proved that a strategic plan for working with key state organizations and institutions improves the chances for successful implementation of the Food Alliance certification program. This proposed plan was compatible with the Leopold Center's interest in evaluating the market potential for a new or existing food ecolabel in Iowa.

Project goals were to:

- Gain an understanding of other ecolabels, geography-based labels, and certification programs in operation in Iowa, and the role of Food Alliance's certification within that environment;
- Determine the food system partnership potential in Iowa among Food Alliance Midwest and retailers, foodservice management organizations, distributors/wholesalers, and processors, and gain knowledge of lessons learned from past and current partnership projects;
- Determine the level of interest in the Food Alliance certification among producer groups, cooperatives, and associations;
- Determine the roles that Iowa organizations and institutions may have in the development and implementation of the program in Iowa and the region;
- Determine priority communities/regions in Iowa to introduce the program; and
- Develop a set of strategies to effectively expand the Food Alliance program in Iowa during the summer and fall of 2004.

Approach and methods

The research project devised to meet these goals included six major strategies:

1. Research and analyze other ecolabels, geography-based labels, and certification programs in operation in Iowa and assess the role of Food Alliance certification within that environment. Project investigators compared and con-

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Budget:

\$20,000 for year one

trusted existing ecolabels with Food Alliance certification, and developed a matrix and positioning map to analyze the potential role Food Alliance certification might play in Iowa. They also explored ways the certification program might complement current programs in Iowa.

2. Research and analyze potential food system partnerships among Food Alliance Midwest and retailers, foodservice management organizations, distributors/wholesalers and processors. Working closely with the Leopold Center and other collaborators, investigators studied past work done in support of local food supplies and probed the potential for new or expanded partnerships.

3. Explore the level of interest among producer groups, cooperatives, and associations in the Food Alliance certification through presentations and participation at key meetings and conferences. IIC and Food Alliance Midwest worked with the Leopold Center, Iowa State University, and member-based organizations to identify producers and producers meetings to attend and/or present information about the Food Alliance certification program. The investigators also evaluated specific levels of interest in the program. Food Alliance used the planning grant funds to support additional orientation and explanation meetings with members of producer groups who had expressed interest in the certification process.

4. Identify and evaluate potential roles Iowa organizations and institutions might have in the development and implementation of the program in Iowa and the region. IIC and FAM established an advisory committee made up of eight organizations—Iowa Institute for Cooperatives, Food Alliance Midwest, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Leopold Center, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, Iowa State University Extension, Naturally Iowa, and Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship—to help define the roles, responsibilities, and organizations needed to expand the Food Alliance successfully in Iowa. The advisory committee met once to provide ideas, recommendations, and feedback to the lead investigators.

5. Research and identify priority communities/regions in Iowa in which to introduce the FAM program. The project leaders utilized FAM's experience of expanding into new communities and regions, as well as the expertise of the advisory committee members, to select the specific communities and regions most likely to be receptive to the program.

6. Work began with the advisory committee to develop a set of strategies based on the research and

analysis in this project to effectively expand the Food Alliance certification program in Iowa during 2005.

Results and discussion

Food Alliance certification is unique and addresses many consumer concerns. This certification program fills a marketing niche for growers and producers in Iowa. Both retail grocery and foodservice operations expressed interest in distributing and purchasing foods raised in an environmentally and socially responsible manner.

There are readily available opportunities to take immediate advantage of within targeted retail and foodservice venues in selected cities. There are additional easily accessible opportunities for select products, beginning with fruits and vegetables.

Longer term opportunities exist for sales of dairy and meat products, based upon developing adequate supplies to meet the potential demand.

Conclusions

- The time is right for Food Alliance Midwest to expand into Iowa, but the expansion must be done in a thoughtful and strategic manner.
- Work must be done collaboratively with key nonprofit organizations, public institutions, and private companies to develop a comprehensive plan to expand the program in Iowa.
- Collaborate closely with other ecolabel programs such as "Buy Fresh Buy Local."
- Work closely with Iowa State University Extension to educate extension staff about the Food Alliance certification.
- Leverage private sector interest in sustainable agriculture and consumer trends to increase both the supply of and demand for Food Alliance-certified products in Iowa.
- Food Alliance Midwest must work with grower groups and associations to reach as many growers as possible.
- Target nearby opportunities to build and share success stories.
- Keep focused on demand and building awareness at the account level. Get the institutions,

foodservice management companies, and retailers behind the Food Alliance certification program.

- Develop partnerships with food system players based on mutual trust and shared opportunities.

Impact of results

Research conducted and knowledge gained from work related to this planning grant will prove valuable to the expansion of FAM into Iowa in 2005.

Education and outreach

FAM presented the research findings of its advisory committee in December 2004 and determined strategies to reach out to growers and producer organizations. FAM also presented an overview of ecolabels at a workshop that was part of the Practical Farmers of Iowa Annual Conference in January 2005.

**For more information, contact
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