Research and development of an on-line local foods buying club cooperative

Abstract: Setting up an online food cooperative carries a special set of challenges. Eastern Iowa food system practitioners worked to create a successful cooperative operation to increase local food sales in their communities.

What was done and why?

The Field to Family Regional Food Coalition region of eastern Iowa is one of few areas in the state that is gaining population. There is pent-up demand in this region for local food produced sustainably with sound environmental practices, equitable economic relationships, and concern for social impact. The ICFAC set a goal of improving regional access to healthy, seasonal and affordable food. Establishment of an online local foods cooperative was identified as a way to fulfill the goal, and support local farmers and food entrepreneurs.

The project objectives were to:
1. Determine challenges and resources needed to establish an online local foods buying club cooperative, Iowa Valley Food Cooperative (IVFC);
2. Research proven systems and models in similar cooperatives;
3. Develop the business systems, planning documents, operating procedures and policies necessary to organize the cooperative;
4. Build member and public awareness, support and understanding of local producers and the benefits of sustainable agriculture;
5. Build capacity, develop new outlets, and increase business stability of local producers; and
6. Write a case study on the development of the cooperative

What did we learn?

The project and case study that summarize the steps taken to organize and open the Iowa Valley Food Co-op will provide strong reference points for those getting started during a period of rising interest in online grocery sales. All of the project objectives were fulfilled and the findings already have positively affected other Iowa networks of farms and businesses. The project investigators have had numerous communications with networks in the Quad Cities, north central Iowa and the Iowa Food Co-op in central Iowa. These contacts offered opportunities to share lessons learned, effective organizing documents, producer guidelines and contacts.