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Evaluating the impact of a decade of regional food system work on growers in northeast Iowa

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Evaluating the impact of a decade of regional food system work on growers in northeast Iowa

Abstract

Among the 14 farmers responding to the email question “Is Northern Iowa Food and Farm Partnership (NIFFP) helping create a vibrant local food system in their area?” 66.7 percent responded that it was somewhat valuable, with another 25 percent saying it is very valuable.

Keywords

Community-based food systems, Economic and environmental impacts

Disciplines

International and Community Nutrition



Evaluating the impact of a decade of regional food system work on growers in northeast Iowa

Abstract: This report describes findings of a survey completed by farmer/growers involved with the Northern Iowa Food and Farm Partnership (NIFFP). It describes their opinions and interests as formed by their past involvement in the regional food system, and identifies their areas of need as owners of farm businesses.

Principal Investigator:

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Budget:

\$12,636 for year one

Q What effects have regional food systems groups had in northeast Iowa?

A Among the 14 farmers responding to the email question “Is NIFFP helping create a vibrant local food system in their area?” 66.7 percent responded that it was somewhat valuable, with another 25 percent saying it is very valuable.



MARKETING

Background

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the impact of regional food systems work on growers in Iowa’s Cedar River Valley region. The study was to examine the extent to which growers have experienced positive impacts such as greater profitability or increased market access that can be attributed to organized regional food systems work. Staff at the Northern Iowa Food and Farm Partnership and the Center for Energy and Environmental Education (CEEE) at the University of Northern Iowa led the project, and chose to hire an outside analyst to do the assessment of their work. UNI-CEEE contracted with Penny Brown (now at Prairie Rivers RC&D) to carry out the evaluation.

Approach and methods

Phase I: Penny Brown interviewed growers to test a set of questions related to their experiences with NIFFP and to determine future educational and business needs for building a regional food system. Eight growers were contacted and six interviews were conducted. This process allowed for testing and revising questions before administering a survey to a broader audience.

Phase II: Penny Brown also conducted an online survey for this phase of the project. The link to the survey was sent by email to 40 farmer/growers, including those interviewed during Phase I. A total of 14 growers completed the survey.

Results and discussion

Several questions collected basic information about the farmers and their farms. Respondents tended to be older: 57 percent of respondents were between 55 and 64 years old, 21 percent were between 45 and 54, 14 percent were between 35 and 44, and 7 percent were between 25 and 34. The group tended to be well educated, with 86 percent having graduated from college. The average number of years in farming was just over 20, with the range of responses being 3 to 50 years. The average farm size was 29 acres, with the range of responses being 2 to 250 acres. Eighty-five percent of respondents owned their farm, and 15 percent leased their land on a cash

rent basis. The average number of years they owned their farm was 16, with the range of responses being from 4 to 25 years. Thus, the group tended to be older and well educated with farming operations that were well established.

Conclusions

In terms of current skills, survey respondents rated themselves highest on sales and production skills, invoicing systems, promotional materials, and understanding customer needs, and they rated themselves lowest on having sufficient skilled labor, a website for their business, and equipment and facilities to process, store and transport products. As for the top challenges facing their businesses, those most often mentioned were adequate skilled labor, weather, and marketing/finding good customers, followed by facilities, insurance for specialty crops, and rising input costs.

When asked about the NIFFP's role in helping created a vibrant local food system, more than 90 percent of respondents felt NIFFP was either somewhat or very valuable. However, 58 percent indicated NIFFP was somewhat valuable and 42 percent indicated NIFFP was not at all valuable in helping their individual farms succeed. Thus, respondents felt more positive about NIFFP's efforts to create a vibrant local food system than they did about its assistance in making their individual farm operations successful.

According to growers involved with NIFFP, its most valuable functions for them were networking, information sharing, providing a support group, promoting local foods, and helping with training. Growers with past involvement with NIFFP cited these items as areas where the group proved least valuable: getting new customers who call growers, bringing in information and knowledge from other states, working more collaboratively with existing grower groups, and gaining more public exposure.

On the topic of possible future services that could be provided by NIFFP, the highest-rated potential services for farmers were help with promotional material development, food safety training, aggregation and distribution of products, and marketing assistance. The lowest-rated possible services were farm succession and estate planning, crop planning and management, negotiating lease agreements, and livestock planning and management.

**For more information,
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Impact of results

Enshayan is working with the Black Hawk County Health Department to do a community food assessment for the county. The results will reveal gaps and opportunities, which would lead to an action plan on food prepared by the county and all who are interested.

Leveraged funds

No additional funds were leveraged by this project.