Convening the Regional Food Systems Working Group

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.

What was done and why?

Established in 2003, the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) is a statewide 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.

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.

What did we learn?

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.