

A food distribution network for the Northern Iowa Food and Farm Partnership

Abstract: Matching the supply of local food to the demand requires local food producers to make adjustments in their food distribution systems. This project looked at collaborative models to help these producers make their post-farm operations more efficient.

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Through careful planning, including consultation with Red Tomato, a collaborative marketing and distribution model was developed and implemented. Farmers integrated many aspects of their operations into this collaborative model, which included cooperative crop planning, seed and soil amendment purchases, sharing of market demand from specific buyers, cooperative use of cold storage and transportation, etc.



What was done and why?

Despite the relatively healthy number of local food producers, in recent years the demand for locally grown food has outpaced its supply. While local producers were busy increasing food production to respond to demand, it was apparent that there were inefficiencies and gaps in the traditional and local food infrastructure. Local and regional food producers were aware of the need for greater collaboration and efficiencies in packing, trucking and marketing efforts, yet struggled to find a place in the traditional food distribution system. Due to scale and the nature of their business, using the traditional food distribution infrastructure was not a viable solution.

Through careful examination of other models of creatively designed and more scalable models of local food distribution, this project aimed to provide support, consultation and solutions to an organized group of growers seeking to achieve collaborative efficiencies that would span the infrastructure gaps within the traditional food distribution model.

Objectives for the project were to:

1. Work with growers already selling to institutional food buyers by providing them with technical assistance needed to launch the pilot network,
2. Work with growers to establish a pilot regional food distribution network, and
3. Partner with food champions in other parts of the state to engage in information exchange and promote collaborative opportunities.

What did we learn?

Smaller and newer operations perceived improved efficiencies in marketing access and distribution, which provided incentives for their continued participation. Larger growers experienced fewer benefits from cooperative marketing as many already had well-established markets, which served as a disincentive to continued participation. However, these growers experienced improved efficiencies with distribution, which inspired them to continue to experiment with new strategies in removing existing bottlenecks from the supply chain through focusing on transportation logistics and associated efficiencies.