

Increasing the capacity of a local food hub to service the public school market

Abstract:

Cooperation with a local food hub can be beneficial for bringing together farmers and school district food services interested in serving local food to their students. This project in northeast Iowa successfully navigated some of the challenges for these groups to collaborate.

Investigators:

Teresa Wiemerslage
Regional Program
Coordinator
ISU Extension and
Outreach
Waukon, Iowa

In order to truly grow farm to school programs, there needs to be an intermediary market like a food hub that can serve as a facilitator between the farmer and the school. Schools are a low-margin, high-volume market and food hubs need multiple producers available to meet the demand. Food hubs also need enough capacity to conduct weekly calls to schools to collect orders.



MARKETING

What was done and why?

Leopold Center funding for this project was used to strengthen the efforts to connect rural school districts with an emerging non-profit local food hub, Iowa Food Hub (IFH). Funds provided assistance to schools to procure local products, create weekly delivery routes and investigate costs for minimally-processed food items. Four school districts were selected as pilot sites for this grant; however, the services and products developed were offered to any school district that chose to participate. (This project also received some funds from a USDA Farm to School grant.)

The food hub coordinator worked with school food services, FoodCorps members, ISU Extension, Luther College, local farms and businesses, and members of the community to meet these objectives:

- Develop ways of procuring more local food at prices that are fair to farms, processors, and schools;
- Develop aggregation models and methods that allow schools to partake in farm to school;
- Determine the needs and costs for light processing of vegetables; and
- Create distribution models that include schools, are logical and leverage existing resources.

What did we learn?

Schools can be a significant market for local foods and food hubs. Farmers interested in those markets will need to refine their wholesale production practices and scale up production to satisfy those markets. Iowa Food Hub primarily sells to institutional food service units (schools and colleges), grocery stores and restaurants. Monthly sales for the Iowa Food Hub show large spikes in September, October and November that coincide with local food sales to schools and October's designation as National Farm to School Month.

In its third year of operation, IFH doubled its sales from 2014 to 2015. Community K-12 school districts accounted for 11 percent of those sales. The increase in sales led to the addition of staff at the food hub. In 2015, IFH worked with more than 50 farms and food businesses and returned over \$508,000 to farmers.