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Best Practices of the Regional Food Systems Working Group

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Best Practices of the Regional Food Systems Working Group

Abstract

This is a working document of the Regional Food Systems Working Group that outlines some of the best practices for developing a local food system in the areas of coalition building, fundraising, promotion of local food, events and celebrations, producer training and workshops, sales to institutions, farm-to-school and fulfilling the facilitation/connector role. It was compiled from information submitted by regional coordinators of the RFSWG.

Disciplines

Agriculture

**Regional Food Systems Working Group
Book of Knowledge**



Best Practices of the Regional Food Systems Working Group

Established in 2003, the Regional Food Systems Working Group 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 91 Iowa counties. Each regional food group works with different stakeholders – farmers, food-based businesses, non-profits, Extension, RC&Ds, educational institutions and government agencies – to support local food systems development in their region. For more information, contact Lynn Heuss, Assistant RFSWG Coordinator, leheuss@iastate.edu.

On the web: www.leopold.iastate.edu/regional-food-systems-working-group

November 2014

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Thank you to the RFSWG coordinators who answered the survey and participated in developing this document.

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Introduction

Communities of Practice create an environment of learning where members share expertise and build on ideas. The ideas evolve into best practices and are eventually recorded in a book of knowledge. Just as engineers document their standard of work and best practices for automobile assembly, the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) is documenting the food system activities that have advanced the work of building a regional food system in Iowa.

This manual is a compilation of food system activities implemented to date by the regional coordinators of the RFSWG. These coordinators were asked to fill out and submit best practice questionnaires on the following program focus areas:

1. Coalition Building
2. Funding, Fundraising, Funder Relationships
3. Local Food Promotion (Buy Fresh Buy Local)
4. Celebration Events, Agri-tourism
5. Producer Training/Workshops
6. Local Food Sales to Institutions
7. Farm to School
8. Business development, Connector role, Value Chain Facilitator

This manual is intended to be a living, working document that RFSWG members can continuously update and add projects and initiatives to share lessons learned and showcase ideas with potential for impact and replicability. Group members who use this manual should contribute to the program area summaries: their collective wisdom is contained in this manual.

The target audiences are the local food coordinators and the partners of the Regional Food Systems Working Group. Other practitioners in food system development also may find the projects and initiatives useful in their work in other parts of the United States and the world.

Regional practitioners may find this manual valuable in exposing new regional coordinators or community leaders to effective food system activities.

This manual also may be a reference guide for a region in search of new, innovative projects that have the potential to further their region's food system development.

NOTE: Documents contributed by regional coordinators can be found in an accompanying document. Get a link to this publication and the accompanying document on the Leopold Center website, www.leopold.iastate.edu/BestPractices-RFSWG.

Program Area Summaries

1. Coalition Building

Working together, many can accomplish more than is possible for an individual. Regional local food coalitions have been formed in many regions across Iowa. Some are more active and formally organized than others. Creating and managing a coalition brings expertise and experience together to implement and monitor food system activities.

Benefits	Challenges
<p>As members build trust and gain a better understanding of each individual's capacity, they begin to refer each other to new opportunities such as presentations, grants and more.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Creating a cohesive, collaborative group.- Working together toward a common goal can help organizations that may be in competition with each other to build a new, more productive relationship. Leaders will need to work with the organizations to keep focused on the common goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Recruiting members for a coalition may be a challenge for shy, introvert type coordinators.- Sometimes email cannot capture the attention of those you are trying to reach. Pick up the phone or stop by for a visit.

Recommendations

- Interview individuals first before inviting them to the coalition. Get to know the stakeholder and what it is they hope to gain from participating in the coalition.
- Conduct an annual SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) assessment with stakeholders. This information should be used to develop and monitor a coalition's strategic plan.
- The coordinator can serve as a leader, guiding and managing the groups' activities.
- Be patient: change takes time.
- Ensure that producers are represented in the coalition.
- Create a brand for the coalition and mission statement that is easy for others to recite and communicate to others.

Evaluation indicators:

- Increase in inquiries to the group
- Increased participation by members

Future opportunities - look for ways to involve youth

Contributors: *Southwest Iowa Food and Farm Initiative, Southern Iowa, and Eat Greater Des Moines.*

2. Funding, Fundraising, Funder Relationships

Funding support for regional food system activities is necessary and a constant challenge to acquire. Some important steps regions can take to further their plans include developing grant writing skills, networking with funders, and creating the best pitch for funding support.

No submissions received at this time (10/2014).

3. Local Food Promotion

An early focus in building a regional food system is to increase awareness of the impact of local foods on the social, economic, environmental, and public health of communities. These promotional activities can be in the form of simple educational activities, public events, fundraisers, presentations, media campaigns and more.

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Works as a referral list for region - Branding for a region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initial and follow-up contacts are time consuming. - Coordination is the largest cost.

Recommendations

- Develop producer and purchaser contact list through networking.
- Use the list as a resource for referrals and references.
- Membership model provides nominal income to offset production costs.
- Professional design support is very useful and can be pro bono or contract labor. Local newspaper may offer design and printing support.

Future Opportunities:

- CSA Fair for Buy Fresh Buy Local (BFBL) members to sell shares
- Cooking, recipe sharing – What to do with local foods? How to prepare?

Evaluation indicators – Number of names on contact list increases

Contributors: *Eat Greater Des Moines, UNI, and Hometown Harvest.*

4. Celebration Events/Agri-Tourism

Large, high-exposure events draw a diverse audience and also work to connect consumers directly with their regional producers. Media members often are attracted to these events.

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Events start to connect growers with businesses, institutions, consumers; coordinator plays connector role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Marketing and recruitment for attendance requires majority of effort. - Event coordinator arranges multiple follow-up conversations and coaches businesses through event.

- Often best times for on-farm events are when producers are in production mode.

Recommendations

- For local business support, try partnering with economic development offices for the area (city/county/region), chambers of commerce, regional tourism boards, local media.
- Encourage partners to offer in-kind support.
- Create a committee to support the event and all the event details. Develop work plan and timeline for event that committee can work from.
- Visit farm before event to coordinate details with producer.
- The coordinator’s role should be to build a team of partners, keep them focused and motivated.
- Find event sponsors to cover costs of materials and other expenses.
- Create promotional materials – flyers, yard signs, handouts at farm for those who don’t get to meet farmer.
- Use grower contact list and network for connections, rely on BFBL directory.
- Have the event benefit an organization.

Evaluation indicators:

- Business partner sees increase in purchases of local food
- Business partner experiences increased support for business
- Number of social media shares

Future Opportunities - statewide coordination and promotion

Contributors: *Dubuque Eats Well, Hometown Harvest, and Southern Iowa.*

5. Training/Workshops

Producer-focused regional trainings or workshops provide valuable educational opportunities for the region’s farmers/growers/producers. These trainings can assist producers in growing their operations and producing more fresh foods. Training topic areas may include business processes, farming techniques, financial management and capital building, and food safety practices.

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training can assist producers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adequate promotion is critical to filling classrooms.

Recommendations

- Understand the demand for the training. Buyer interest may be the incentive producers need to pursue training and certifications.
- Community colleges, ISU Extension and RC&D officers are great partners for providing instructors and hosting trainings.
- Cost-share opportunities increase producer accessibility to training.

Evaluation indicators:

- Number of course graduates
- Number of farms receiving certification

Future Opportunities - Kirkwood Community College vegetable producer training

Contributors: *Northeast Iowa Food & Farm Coalition* and *Dream to Farm* course.

6. Local Food Sales to Institutions

A high-level outcome of building the local food system is making fresh, local foods available and more widely accessible. Activities that further this goal include working directly with purchasers (such as school food service directors or chefs) to coordinate their relationships with producers. These business deals are generally at wholesale volume and prices. Coordination in several regions has become formally organized and incorporated through business entities such as food hubs.

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Producers are investing in business opportunities that benefit them.- Consumers have local products accessible to them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Moving purchasers who are concerned with price and budget to make connections with institutions.- Many initiatives start out as open to all producers. It takes time to identify the serious, committed, reliable producers needed to fulfill the institutional demand.

Recommendations

- Relationships are partnerships; successful ones require planning and conversation.

Evaluations - Economic Impact Evaluation of RFSWG

Future Opportunities - Food Hub Working Group

Contributors: *Northeast Iowa Food & Farm Coalition* and *SWIFFI*.

7. Farm to School

Farm to School programming includes working with school leadership to provide seasonal, local foods from local farms, classroom presentations with farm field trips, campus education on local products, and support for school gardens. Many regions are working to teach students about where their food comes from, and encourage a greater appreciation and appetite for fresh, healthy foods.

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Coordinator introduces producers to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Buy-in and reinforcement from school personnel and students

- Schools represent a significant volume of meals per day. Purchasing local foods for cafeterias, at a fair price, can support a large number of farmers
- Pricing, processing, and production are always part of the conversation for cafeterias purchasing local foods

Recommendations

- Meet with food service directors to understand their interest, availability and limitations.
- Farm to school activities and opportunities are great. A paid coordinator can make them happen.
- It's about relationships. Take the time to invest in school personnel, community and producer relationships.
- Involve students in promotional events.
- Be flexible! Be patient! Working relationships in school food systems can take years to develop.

Contributors: *Hometown Harvest*

8. Business Development/Connector Role/Value Chain Facilitator

As regional coordinators expand their contact lists and build trust with community leaders, they are often asked to source and connect local producers with local buyers. The coordinator's role can range from a simple introduction to assistance in negotiating price and delivery with the producer and purchaser. Buyers may be from restaurants, schools, universities, care facilities and hospitals.

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Producers and buyers expand their networks and make potential new business connections. - Create a rare moment for busy producers and buyers to sit down, meet each other and connect on how they can do business - Can be low cost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need a trusted resource to introduce and recruit producers, buyers and chefs to participate in events.

Recommendations

- Create a networking event set up like speed dating.

Evaluations

- A short evaluation questionnaire is helpful at the end of an event
- Annual survey to measure changes in purchasing, sales numbers from business contacts

Future Opportunities - Working with food hubs in region to connect producers to local food hub

Contributors: *Eat Greater Des Moines*

Appendix

A. RFSWG Contributions

These documents were contributed by RFSWG participants (for actual submissions, see the accompanying document, “RFSWG Best Practices Contributions document” available on the Leopold Center website at: www.leopold.iastate.edu/BestPractices-RFSWG).

Area	Contributor	Contribution
Coalition building	<i>Southern Iowa</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Southern Iowa producer institution invitation letter - Southern Iowa Food Council meeting minutes, 8/21 and 9/11 - Southern Iowa letter request for data from institution
	<i>Eat Greater Des Moines</i> (Food rescue focus)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eating Greater Des Moines – Share the Love presentation - Food Rescue article – written for <i>Healthiest State Initiative</i> newsletter - Food Rescue short film
Local food promotion	<i>Eat Greater Des Moines</i> (CSA Fair)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - CSA brochure with logos - CSA Fair press release
	<i>UNI (BFBL directory)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Buy Fresh Buy Local Producer membership form and letter - Buy Fresh Buy Local Buyer membership form and letter - 2014 UNI Local Food Program Directory
Events / Agri-tourism	<i>Dubuque Eats Well</i> (Farm to table dinner)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2013 Driftless Farm to Table poster - 2013 Driftless Farm Crawl handout - 2013 Driftless Farm Crawl save the date postcard
	<i>Southern Iowa</i> (Food Crawl)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Southern Iowa Uptown Creston Food Crawl invitation - Southern Iowa Uptown Creston Food Crawl menu - Southern Iowa Uptown Creston Food Crawl flyer - Southern Iowa Uptown Creston Food Crawl results
Training/Workshops	<i>Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - GAP FOOD Safety
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dream to Farm Course (14 weeks/3 hrs. each course)
Local Food Sales to	<i>Northeast Iowa Food &</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Getting Started with Local Foods at

Institutions	<i>Fitness Initiative</i>	Institutions publication
Business development/ Connector Role/ Value Chain Facilitator	<i>Eat Greater Des Moines</i> (Chef and Producer Speed Dating)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2013 media release: Eat Greater Des Moines Offers Speed Dating with Chefs - Chef Producer Speed Dating flyer - Chef Producer Speed Dating overview - Chef Producer Speed Dating evaluation form - Chef Producer Speed Dating evaluations

B. Best Practices Questionnaire

Please describe the Best Practice and lessons learned, including as much as possible, the following information to enable RFSWG members and readers to have a clear understanding of your experience. Answer each question for your focus area.

Contact Information of the Respondent(s):

You may collaborate with others to complete the questionnaire. Please provide their contact information. You may also delegate this to someone you feel qualified to answer the questions.

Name:	Name:	Name:
Address:	Address:	Address:
Organization:	Organization:	Organization:
Position title:	Position title:	Position title:
Phone:	Phone:	Phone:
Email:	Email:	Email:
Years/months in your position:	Years/months in your position:	Years/months in your position:

1. Basic Information on a Best Practice

1.1. Program Focus Area/Best Practice:

1.2. Describe your the demographics and geography of your region (ie, rural, urban, college town, etc.).

1.3. How long has your organization been implementing this practice? Is it seasonal? Are you finished? If not, is there a planned completion or stop date?

2. Description of Best Practice

2.1. Please describe your program(s) or initiative(s) in this focus area.

2.2. Who are the main stakeholders, initiators, and/or actors in this practice?

2.3. How and why are they involved in the practice?

2.4 Who are the beneficiaries of this best practice?

2.5 About how many stakeholder and beneficiaries are involved, respectfully? List the numbers for stakeholders and beneficiaries separately.

2.6 What resources are required to support your best practice?

- a. Personnel (hours, skills, experience):
- b. Supplies, Equipment:

- c. Materials (manuals, brochures, marketing materials):
Please attach available materials.

2.7 Besides resources, describe what kind of administrative, social, political, and/or cultural support needs to be in place for your organization to implement the practice. In other words, who must be supportive and how do you know that support is there? (This might include buy in from administrators, board members, community leaders, co-workers, producers, funders, etc.)

3. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Practice

3.1. Briefly describe the strengths of your practice.

3.2. Describe roadblocks encountered by your efforts and how they were or were not overcome.

3.3. Why do you consider this program a successful best practice? Please describe some essential elements or key success factors.

3.4. Can you express this success in qualitative or quantitative terms? How do you measure success? Describe your methodology.

3.5. What are your ideas for future projects related to this focus area?

4. Possibilities for Replication

4.1. What lessons have you learned that would be valuable to pass on?

4.2. Were there any special conditions that would prevent others adopting the proposed best practice?

4.3. What other groups or/models, excluding yours, do you believe is excelling in this area of food system development? Please describe.

Other information and notes:

Attachments:

Attach documents to be used by others as templates. This may include planning documentation (communication plans, project plans), communication templates (emails, newsletters, letters), marketing materials (posters, handouts), and other resources.

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	