Pottawattamie County Farm to Fork (Phase III)

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Pottawattamie County Farm to Fork (Phase III)

Abstract
This continuation of a previous project showed the value of hiring a local food coordinator to aid in advancing local food systems in southwest Iowa.

Keywords
Community-based food systems, Human systems demographics and beginning farmer programs

Disciplines
Human Geography | International and Community Nutrition

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Will dedicated staff, focused on creating connections for the development of a local food system in southwest Iowa, be able to facilitate a stronger, more resilient food system?

Dedicated staff has greatly improved the capacity of this regional food system. Review has shown that more staff is needed at the local and regional level in order to continue increasing local food system capacity and resiliency. Current systems in place to serve Iowa’s farmers have not adapted to the changes in agriculture to meet the rising demand for a local food system. Having a local food coordinator provided much needed services, technical support, networking and project development for food-based farmers and ranchers.

Background

Southwest Iowa is a predominately rural region, with more than two dozen farmers markets, a diminishing population, and a median household income that is declining. Council Bluffs (population 68,268) is the largest metropolitan area.

When this grant was submitted, Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors and concerned citizens had coordinated and organized Pottawattamie County Farm to Fork meetings and planning sessions. These meetings eventually led to the County Board of Supervisors appointing an eight-member, volunteer Local Food Council.

During the initial organization meetings, strategic planning needs were identified and the these goals developed: dealing with the lack of grower vendors (local food producers) in the region, addressing education and networking to improve the infrastructure to support a healthy, local food-based economy, and gaining support from decision makers and elected officials.

The original request for funding was to provide staff hours to build the capacity of growers--the primary concern identified by the planning committee. A Local Food Coordinator was needed to complete tasks that would strengthen the local food system.

Cass County also has appointed an eight-member, volunteer, local food (policy) council to serve the needs of their county to develop and support community-based local food systems. Fremont County has begun hosting community meetings, and conducting education and outreach to support the creation of a board of supervisor-appointed local food council. This work is being done by the Fremont County Economic Development Corporation in partnership with Golden Hills RC&D.

Abstract: This continuation of a previous project showed the value of hiring a local food coordinator to aid in advancing local food systems in southwest Iowa.
The central question asked in this project: Will dedicated staff focused on creating connections for the development of a local food system in southwest Iowa be able to facilitate a stronger, more resilient food system?

**Approach and methods**

A dedicated staff position was created to work strictly within the local food system to help achieve these project goals:
1. Identify existing local food producers,
2. Determine local food producer needs and opportunities,
3. Foster relationships with local food buyers (institutional and individual),
4. Gauge buyers’ willingness to purchase local products and systems in place to do so,
5. Offer a mentoring program to assist new local food producers to become successful, and
6. Facilitate connections between local food producers and food service operators.

**Results and discussion**

In December 2010 Golden Hills RC&D hosted the USDA Deputy Undersecretary of Agriculture in Oakland, Iowa, to look at ways to further develop public and private partnerships for the benefit of foodshed development in southwest Iowa and southeast Nebraska. This meeting included No More Empty Pots, area farmers and state and local USDA Rural Development representatives. Follow-up meetings have been held with Iowa Western Community College, Metro Community College, Nebraska State Senator Brenda Council, and Nebraska Rural Development.

In September 2010 Will Allen of Growing Power of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, came to Council Bluffs and Omaha to meet with the regional core leadership team to continue the discussion on becoming a Growing Power Regional Outreach Training Center (ROTC). Work continues with Growing Power to craft a partnership that is mutually beneficial to all partners.

Both events underscore the high level of project work being developed and implemented in the region. For the first time, a balanced and equal partnership between southeast Nebraska and southwest Iowa has formed to provide support to the entire foodshed. This partnership allows organizers to distribute resources and services where they are needed most in the greater Omaha metropolitan area, as well as rural southwest Iowa.

The funding in this grant was the foundation of many strong regional and statewide relationships, building capacity and connectivity. There is still a need to fund additional positions for regional food system development such as compost manager, aquaculture systems manager, and web-designers/managers. In looking at the foodshed, there are many business start-up opportunities, and a non-profit can support the initial work and support the opportunities from initial non-profit operations to for-profit enterprises.
In overcoming the geo-political boundaries that have made for excessive competition within the foodshed, more shared community characteristics exist than divergences. The greater Omaha metropolitan area and the rural areas of southwest Iowa share these characteristics: population decline, investment decline, poor educational attainment, increased poverty, lack of food access and high levels of food insecurity, and loss of infrastructure. The strategy has been to focus, leverage and maximize resources including those of partners and supporters while also implementing tangible development projects that will lead to positive outcomes that bridge urban sustainability and rural renewal.

Conclusions
Designing a systems-style approach to regional local food system development resulted in many successes. Having dedicated staff has allowed for the creation of improved communication pathways, more effective information dissemination, and a dramatic rise in mutually beneficial partnerships. All of these improved components have led to a rapid rise of local food projects starting and successfully developing in southwest Iowa and southeast Nebraska. Nearly 50 new partnerships were created during the past two years to support local food system development.

The work of local food system development requires, time, patience and diligence. It involves public speaking, meeting facilitation, the fine art of conversation and would greatly benefit from more staff. The greatest needs going forward will be to continue to leverage suitable funds to support staff, develop better web-based tools that assist local food producers and buyers, and create a campus-style facility for the regional local food systems in southwest Iowa and southeast Nebraska.

Impact of results
The project objectives were met, although some elements had to be adapted to meet the current food system capacity. The dedicated staff position of local food coordinator had broad positive impact on the local food system development in southwest Iowa. Multiple projects and partnerships have been developed to support local food production, funds have been leveraged and public outreach and education is at an all-time high. Local food producers feel more supported, and technical assistance is more accessible to producers in southwest Iowa.

Project assessment will be done in 2013 at the five-year mark. To date, four farm-based businesses have received direct technical assistance for start-up, without which these businesses would not have been able to operate. More than 100 stakeholders have been actively engaged in food system development and an interstate partnership has been formed to serve the designated food-shed area. More than 70 local food producers have been identified and multiple projects have provided training and outreach within the food-shed. Two new farmers markets have been started in counties that previously had none. Two counties have board of supervisor-appointed local food councils, an additional county is in the formation stages of a local food council and another two counties have recently formed working groups to lay the groundwork for local food councils. All of this work has benefited from the services and support of the RC&D and the local food coordinator.
The structured approach to coordinating local food systems through a community non-profit, but in partnership with multiple public and private organizations, is a working model that has been duplicated throughout the state of Iowa. Extension, other RC&Ds and community organizations have hired or are attempting to fill local food coordinator positions. This expanding network of local food coordinators promotes an increase in communications statewide, interagency cooperation, and stronger communication pathways; all of which support stronger regional food systems, better access to resources and the sharing of best practices.

Golden Hills RC&D fields several inquiries each week about how the process has developed in southwest Iowa. The staff and board have travelled widely sharing results, methods, best practices, and tools for successful duplication. The project review has shown that more staff is needed at the local and regional level in order to continue increasing local food system capacity and resiliency.

**Education and outreach**

Stories about the project appeared in the *Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil* on at least 10 occasions from 2008-2010. The *Botna Valley Reporter* printed stories several times in 2009. Nearly 100 presentations and reports on the project were given in southwest Iowa at meetings, workshops and conferences between 2009 and 2010.

**Leveraged funds**

Close to $300,000 in additional funds were leveraged by this grant. Funds came from federal, state and local agencies.