Regional Flavors

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Recommended Citation
McGill, Sherry L. and Gaffey, Abigail Marie, "Regional Flavors" (2012). Leopold Center Completed Grant Reports. 410.
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/leopold_grantreports/410

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Regional Flavors

**Abstract**
Northwest Iowa county agencies and groups worked together to promote the unique aspects of their local production system. Tools include mapping, marketing, outreach and education, and branding.

**Keywords**
Agritourism and place-based food, Community-based food systems

**Disciplines**
International and Community Nutrition | Tourism
What are the local flavors of Northwest Iowa and how can citizens effectively network, distribute information, and promote those flavors in order to support local food business development and foster rural economic development?

By mapping “flavors,” involving partners and stakeholders, and increasing community awareness through marketing, a regional identity has begun to emerge. The identity is rooted in traditional approaches to gardening paired with growing attention to the social, environmental and economic need to “buy local.”

Background

What are the flavors of Northwest Iowa? They are a diverse array of local food producers and artisans. How can we help develop our flavors and local food systems? Asset mapping, marketing and partnerships are key strategies in laying the groundwork for regional rural economic development.

Project objectives:

- Identify all of the players in local food production and engage them in the creation of a local food system that has year-round economic opportunities.
- Identify other markets such as non-chain restaurants, hospitals, nursing homes, schools and day care and senior centers, etc., where locally-grown foods could be purchased and consumed at the community level.
- Brand the Loess Hills as a “Regional Flavor,” identify what makes up that identity, and develop consistent marketing.

Approach and methods

A regional identity will emerge that will promote the local food systems in the Siouxland Loess Hills area: Sioux, Plymouth, Woodbury, Monona, Cherokee and Ida counties. The theme of the website and the Flavors of Northwest Iowa Local Food and Flavor Guide and other information visually represent the regional identity and local food assets in the region. A monthly e-newsletter has been published since November 2010 to highlight regional assets. A blog contributes to a growing identity, and the “Locally Grown Food and Culture” series of events, publications and outreach, all utilizing the Flavors theme, contribute to the emerging identity of the network.

Community awareness of local foods rose. There has been a 100 percent increase in the food producer database voluntary listing with consistent data collection techniques, and a 212 percent increase in newsletter and mail recipients. There has been a 100 percent increase in consistent stakeholder participation with the creation of the Flavors 14-member advisory board.
Increased sales of local foods occurred in both traditional and non-traditional markets. Six new farmers markets began (or were revived) in the region: Marcus, Quimby, Holstein, Ida Grove, Salix, Onawa. There was increased discussion of farmers market improvement and development in five locations. The region also gained two new wineries (Hannel Cellars, Calico Skies); a new Eden Valley Apple Orchard and Farms CSA; a new small processing center partner, Upper Missouri Valley Local Foods Project; and a new local food co-op partner, Red Earth Co-Op, Vermillion SD. The project continued tracking sales at the Sioux City Farmers Market, with 2010 total vendor sales estimated at $600,000, compared to 2011 vendor sales at $500,000. (The decline was partially due to the impact of the Missouri River flooding). Vendor participation increased to 54 members and an additional market day with evening hours was added.

**Results and discussion**

Producer identification was the first and foremost strategy employed to answer the central question. Armed with organized mapping of local food producers (eggs, fruit, honey, meat, grains, vegetables, flowers and herbs), local organizers can look at the bigger picture of northwest regional and local food systems. Including other products such as baked goods, dairy products, wines and beverages, and local artists’ work enhances the diverse regional identity and can lead to the development of regional business clusters that bring together artisans from many trades. This is why the chosen tagline is “Locally Grown Food and Culture.”

All project goals and objectives were accomplished, including mapping local food system assets, creating downloadable maps and guides, creating a website, implementing a branding campaign, conducting citizen perception surveys, establishing a contact database (of over 300 contacts), distributing a monthly newsletter, and continuing to help develop the local food system through producer education and outreach. As the project concludes, investigators are ready to catalyze and record significant improvements in the expected outcomes.

Community awareness and sales are expected to increase as a result of the distribution of publications created by this project. Ten thousand copies of the Local Food and Flavor Guide were distributed in April 2012. (See www.flavorsofnorthwestiowa.org.)

Continued funding has been established for this work to continue with “flavor mapping,” information distribution and partnership building with an added strategic target on collecting economic food system data. The regional food coordinator position is now full-time with responsibilities to continue stakeholder meetings, individual and group producer consultation and support, marketing and website maintenance, coordination of educational opportunities for producers and consumers, and to promote the Flavors of Northwest Iowa. Programming offered producers many training events such as high tunnel workshops and a Tri-State Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference. An agritourism tour in Monona County was well attended.

**Conclusions**

The strongest outcome was the identification and development of a regional identity
for locally grown food and culture. There is some indication of increased community awareness and sales according to qualitative data, but quantitative analysis is lacking. The strategies to map producers, increase stakeholder involvement, and add to the contact database proved successful.

**Impact of results**

The food mapping process initially shows that there is a strong presence of commercial fruit and vegetable production distributed throughout the six-county region. The challenge is to document how these farm and rural businesses are viable and active sources for economic sustainability.

We plan to measure this in the coming year by collecting and providing data to measure the economic impact and growth of local food sales, purchases and jobs. This outcome will be measured by: 1) continued tracking of both sales figures and number of vendors at area farmers’ markets; 2) continued tracking of sales to selected grocery stores or institutional food services; and 3) continued tracking of the number of new market created in communities in northwest Iowa such as farmers’ markets, direct sales to consumer sites, wineries, CSA opportunities, or product placement in traditional grocery retail facilities.

Another task is to help connect members of the network in a way that results in successful business partnerships that will advance local and regional food systems—starting with increased individual producer sales. Rural models for food system development will be helpful for other communities looking for practical ways to incorporate elements from nationwide regional economic development projects such as ACEnet, which originally served as the inspiration for this regional flavor project.

**Education and outreach**

“Locally Grown Food & Culture” is a publication series that includes a map of 2011 Farmers’ Markets and Farm Stands listing times and locations, the 2012 Local Food and Flavor Guide (serves as a local food directory) and Flavors of Northwest Iowa business cards.

Educational workshops, food system meetings, outreach programs, and special events: (*includes cooperative efforts)

**2010:**

- Information supplied at ISU Extension farmland leasing meeting about the value and potential for commercial horticulture operations
- “Hungry for Homegrown” (the name of the blog) promotion and interviews (citizen perception survey) at Plymouth County Fair
- Flavors of Northwest Iowa promoted in the Woodbury County Extension county fair booth
- Regional food coordinator’s first “sweep” covering LeMars, Cherokee and Orange City areas to identify local food system players, city organizations, economic development initiatives and other potential partners
• Second “sweep” covering Akron, Hawarden, W. Plymouth County and Ida Grove to identify local food system players
• Third “sweep” covering Onawa, Salix, Sloan, Whiting, Turin, Moorhead, Soldier, and Blencoe
• Flavors introduced to economic development coalition “Coalition for a Greater Siouxland”
• New local food initiatives presented at the Food and Farmers Guild meeting, Storm Lake

2011:
• GAPS/Food Safety workshop
• Outreach to new growers interested in starting a pick-your-own operation near Danbury
• “Promote Your Product” workshop offered with the Siouxland Garden Show
• Local Food and Farmers Market planning meeting for market development in Mapleton
• Community food system meeting with food system consultants in Storm Lake
• Presentation at the Siouxland Garden Show and promotion in the ISU Extension booth
• Conference presentation to Ida Grove Economic Development group in Holstein
• Outreach to restaurant, Raspberry’s Bistro, on how to obtain more locally grown foods
• Facilitated tour of commercial vegetable farm near Castana for the ISU Extension Homegrown Lifestyle course
• 30Project local food dinner: partnered with a nonprofit organization from New York City that is hosting 30 dinners across the United States focused on transforming the food system in the coming 30 years
• Presentation to Le Mars County Extension Council
• Flavors of Northwest Iowa welcome table with local food promotion at the Storm Lake Food and Farmers Guild local food dinner for “Taste of Storm Lake”
• Outreach to Getting’s Garden, the largest u-pick strawberry operation in the region
• Outreach to Calico Skies Vineyard, looking for a connection to local foods to serve in their winery
• Summer Soup and Salsa Contest at the Ida County Fair: cooking contest where entrees were rewarded for the number of locally grown ingredients they used in their recipes
• Outreach/marketing at the Iowa State Fair, distributed Flavors of Northwest Iowa business cards
• Information/promotional booth at the Sioux City Farmers Market to promote the Loess Hills Culinary Tour
• Loess Hills Culinary Tour: farm-to-fork farm tour of a grass-fed beef operation, commercial vegetable farm and local winery
• Outreach to DeBoer tree farms, supplied fruit tree marketing information Partnership building at the South Dakota Local Foods Conference
• Outreach to new CSA start-up in Akron
• Outreach to Siouxland Cyclists for Bike N’ Bite ride idea and Gran Fondo bike race food
• Outreach to Iowa Lakes RC&D for new funding and data collection partnership
• Presentations at Plymouth, Cherokee, Buena Vista, Woodbury, Ida and Monona county extension council meetings, and a regional meeting with Lyon, Osceola, Sioux and O’Brien counties to leverage funding to continue the program
• Tri-State Fruit and Vegetable Growers Symposium: one-day training on fruit and vegetable production and marketing (Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota Extension) with 90 attendees

2012
• High Tunnel Production Workshop
• Food Safety Workshop

Leveraged funds

Total leveraged funds for the project were $64,810. These funds helped expand the part-time regional food coordinator to a full-time position beginning February 2012. Among the funding sources: Western Iowa Tech Community College, The Security Institute and a Department of Labor Community-Based Job Training Partner Grant provided $1,200 in February 2010 and $1,510 in February 2011 to co-sponsor food safety workshops.

In December 2011 a Community Vitality Center mini-grant’s remaining $7,380 originally awarded to Extension Regions 1, 2, 5 and 6, was transferred to the Flavors of Northwest Iowa Project for use in 2012 due to the Regional Flavors project success.

A new partnership with the Iowa Lakes RC&D to share a regional food coordinator position, conduct data collection and share food system development projects in an additional seven counties is estimated at $16,000.

Flavors of Northwest Iowa accomplishments motivated multiple county ISU Extension units to develop the network as a regional ISU Extension and Outreach program. Funds were leveraged to continue regional food system work in the region for the next two years:

Year 1 -- February 1, 2012-June 30, 2012
Woodbury County - $6,000, Buena Vista County - $2,000, Cherokee County - $1,000, Ida County - $1,500, Lyon County - $1,500, Monona County - $1,000, O’Brien County - $1,500, Plymouth County - $1,000 and Sioux County - $1,500

Year 2 July 1, 2012-June 30, 2013
Woodbury County - $10,000, Buena Vista County - $2,000, Cherokee County - $2,000, Ida County - $3,000, Lyon County – TBA, Monona County - $1,500, O’Brien County – TBA, Plymouth County - $2,000 and Sioux County - TBA