

A Snapshot of Local Food Hub Activity in Iowa



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Why?

This is about regional collaborative efforts, moving good food – healthy, green, fair, affordable – beyond the direct marketing realm into larger scale markets so that more producers benefit, more communities have viable economies, and greater access to Good Food and a greater number of acres managed through sustainable practices. (paraphrased Vision statement from The National Good Food Network)

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This preliminary snapshot is another layer of local food exploration and development in Iowa. This publication was made possible by support from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture as part of “Working Together to Grow More”, an April 2, 2012 Local Food Workshop held in Mason City. Healthy Harvest of North Iowa used the workshop to engage a community-based conversation among stakeholders in North Iowa around increasing local food sales. What are the models that we can learn from, what opportunities are waiting just around the corner, and what is keeping us from turning that corner? These are just a few of the preliminary questions we hoped the workshop would begin to tease into the community consciousness.

A List of Local Food Hubs in Iowa

With assistance from Mark Edleman, Director of the Community Vitality Center, the following chart of Iowa Local food Hubs was compiled.

In this chart, a list of seven different food hub types is used to organize the Iowa groups. This rather long list reflects this dynamic and evolving phase of local food system development. Food hub development is complex and the lessons highlighted in the March 2012 Winrock International report point out that, once again, sustainable agriculture involves a savvy partnering of skill and careful management

[Insert Chart of Local Food Hub Activity in Iowa – Excel file]

A Snapshot of Local Food Hub Activity in Iowa

Iowa boasts top ranking among states for the number of farmers markets per capita, but there's a new root reaching into the "soil" of local and regional food system work here in Iowa and across the nation. In Iowa, after close to 20 years of local food system development work by numerous groups, research projects, pilot projects that sometimes only teach us what doesn't work, local food hub development is capturing a whole new wave of interest. Efforts are expanding to include broader range of partners and a broader understanding of the potential to address food sales and access.

But what is a local food hub?

As local food development work begins to incorporate more than the direct market , to envision significant quantities of food moving through larger parts of our food chain, the need to adopt new strategies becomes clear. Small and medium producers can meet these new opportunities...if they find new ways to aggregate, distribute, process, and market their high quality food products.

"As I talk to farmers across the country, regardless of what they produce or where, they all share one common challenge: how to best move product from the farm to the marketplace. This is especially crucial for small and midsize farmers who may not have enough capital to own their own trucks, their own refrigeration units, or their own warehouse space. They might not have the resources to develop sophisticated distribution routes, build effective marketing campaigns or network with regional buyers and customers."

— USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan, April 2011

Food hubs are where it's happening. Food hubs are **aggregating** local produce from many small farmers into orders to satisfy the requirements of large buyers for source-identified locally and regionally grown food. Food hubs are **preparing and processing** regional foods specifically for institutional buyers like schools and hospitals. Food hubs are **increasing access** to fresh healthy foods by widening the distribution opportunities for many small and midsize producers. Food hubs have developed **group branding and certification** schemes that are adding immediate value to the products being sold and providing a level of food integrity now expected from buyers and their customer base. Remarkably, **many food hubs are providing not just one of these services, but some or even all of these services.**

The bottom line is that **food hubs play a critical role in developing stronger supply chains which strengthen regional food systems and are innovative business models to help small and midsize producers maximize their access to the marketplace.**

More technically, a Food Hub is a" centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products."

As we are beginning to better understand food hubs and the role they play in food system development, it's important to focus in on critical aspects and issues.

The National Good Food Network outlines some of the food hub characteristics and some of the critical needs.

Core Components of Food Hubs - Food hubs can provide one or more of the following components.

Recognize that they do not always have to have a facility or central location.

1) Aggregation/Distribution-Wholesale

Drop off point for multiple farmers and a pick up point for distribution firms and customers that want to buy source-identified local and regional food.

2) Active Coordination

Hub business management team that actively coordinates supply chain logistics , including seeking market for producers, and coordinating efforts with distributors, processors, and buyers

3) Permanent Facilities

Provide the space and equipment for food to be stored, lightly processed, packed, palletized and possibly even sold under a Hub's regional label

4) Other Possible Services:

Provide wholesale and retail vending space, offer space for health and social service programs, community kitchens, community meetings, etc.

Some observations from a National Good Food Webinar on Food Hubs...

Food Hubs have critical needs:

- Start-up capital to renovate facilities for aggregation, storage, packing, light processing, and distribution
- Working capital for business management systems to coordinate supply chain logistics (e.g., grower-buyer transactions, aggregation, distribution, and marketing)
- Enterprise development training and technical assistance to increase grower capacity to meet wholesale buyer requirements (volume, quality, packaging, food safety, etc.)

Food Hubs are Pivotal for Re-regionalization

They **need**: Appropriate scale infrastructure

- Method: Engage with existing, as well as create new infrastructure options
- Results:
 - Facilitates job creation
 - Bolsters regional food economies
 - Supports supply chain for those with reduced food access

Resources & Contacts

A new USDA Winrock International study, "Moving Food Along the Value Chain", March 2012 takes a critical look at Innovations in Regional Food Distribution through a case study of eight local food hubs.

Additional and Future news about Food Hubs

- Wallace Center at Winrock International - <http://wallacecenter.org/>
- The National Good Food Network - <http://www.ngfn.org/>
- The National Association of Produce Market Managers - <http://www.napmm.org/>
- Project for Public Spaces - <http://www.pps.org/>
- foodhubs@ams.usda.gov.

There is a project underway by Iowa State University to document food hub activity in Iowa and the surrounding region. Project leaders include:

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A report from this project is expected out Winter 2013.

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