

Routing foods into southeast Iowa

Abstract: The investigators studied the feasibility of starting and operating a farmers' market cooperative in southeast Iowa.

Can local farmers use a joint enterprise to share marketing and sales services for local produce? Examples from other parts of the country showed that business models on comparable levels had been successful and could be explored further.



MARKETING

What was done and why?

Farmers in the project area currently supply fresh produce, meat and dairy products through individual sales and farmers' market events to individuals and families. These products could be marketed to larger institutions through a combined effort of marketing and sales, allowing greater public access to fresh, local food, and increasing the viability for these small farms to scale up production while increasing the possibility of developing a year-round supply of local foods.

The original project objectives were to:

- Assess interest of participation from Buy Fresh Buy Local/Hometown Harvest of Southeast Iowa networked producers;
- Gauge interest from buyers including restaurateurs and major grocers in Wapello, Mahaska and Jefferson counties (i.e., all Hy-Vee stores, restaurants grossing \$100,000+ annually); and
- Determine the feasibility of a cooperative farmer-owned brokerage.

What did we learn?

With larger institutions such as schools, hospitals, and assisted living centers showing interest in purchasing local food, it was determined that founding a multi-farm enterprise is indeed feasible. The grassroots-based and rurally-located GROWN Locally was found to be the best model for an emerging enterprise in southeast Iowa due to the greatest similarity in number of farms, population served, and beginning resources for the proposed enterprise. As an additional bonus, GROWN Locally is located in northeast Iowa and was willing to help mentor the group. (For more information on GROWN Locally, see www.grownlocally.com/)

To help increase the value of the work, a projected dollar amount of purchases from the institutions would have been helpful in recruiting more farms to the project, as well as a list of items and amount of items that the institutions estimate they would purchase.

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