



## Our rural supermarket: Locally grown foods

**Principal Investigator:**

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Conservation &  
Development  
Sergeant Bluff

**Budget:**

\$7,000 for year one  
\$5,000 for year two

**Question:** *Is there enough desire from businesses and people to buy fresh, locally produced food products that would warrant producers making that a focus of a business to make a living for their families?* **Answer:**

*Yes, but it will take a lot of legwork and marketing to ensure enough sales to be profitable. It will also take the ability to address primary consumer concerns found in this project as well as answering a serious question that came up. How can we provide vegetable products for sale during the "off-season" periods of the year?*

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**Abstract:** *Organizers in northwest Iowa wanted to encourage production and purchase of local food in their area.*

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### Background

At the 1999 Alternative Agriculture Exposition in Sioux City, some of the attendees said that they wanted to be able to purchase fresh, locally grown foods but did not know of any available system other than the farmer's market that was struggling at that time. The Leopold Center was able to offer some assistance regarding possible ways to achieve this goal. In 2000 the Sioux Rivers Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) group began work on a special project to provide information and create awareness about the locally grown food supply available in the Siouxland area. In addition to opening doors for marketing locally grown foods and creating an additional income source for farmers, the project offered an opportunity to set up a local food system for the tri-state area (northwest Iowa, northeast Nebraska, and southeast South Dakota).

The objectives of the project were to:

- Inform and create an awareness of the availability of the locally grown food supply,
- Give independent producers a chance to sell their products and give back to the local communities,
- Provide a primary or secondary income for producers,
- Offer an opportunity for businesses and individuals to utilize locally grown products,
- Allow consumption of fresh, high-quality locally grown foods, and
- Show consumers where their food comes

from and how it is grown.

### Approach and methods

In 2000 the project created a collective database of producers in the tri-state area and established the Sioux Rivers RC&D web site. Another Alternative Agriculture Expo was held in Sioux City. The project coordinator (Jessica Sokolowski) held meetings in several counties to explain the project to the public. Information about the project appeared in newspapers and newsletters and on television. Many initial contacts were made with producers at conferences and meetings.

In 2001 contacts were made with institutions and businesses to see if they were interested in purchasing local foods and what their requirements would be. Work was done to encourage northwest Iowa schools to access local markets through the Farm to School Local Food Connection and by using local contacts in their communities. Activities that took considerable time and energy were meetings with producers and businesses, food conferences and meetings with clubs, and organizations to explain the project.

The project did not directly set up markets for the producers. It gathered information for both sides of the marketplace to come together. Information about the producers is available on the project web site, *siouxrivers.rcd.org*, which is updated twice a month. Producers provided information on how they could be contacted, the approximate costs, and any spe-

cial characteristics (i.e. organic, drug-free, conventional, etc.) related to their food source.

Surveys were conducted with food purchasers from local businesses, restaurants and institutions. They were asked about their current food purchasing practices and what their thoughts were about buying local foods. Twenty-seven of 50 businesses responded to the written surveys and personal interviews were conducted at 20 businesses. The results illustrated the main concerns among potential buyers of local foods. The buyers currently have a fairly easy and efficient system for ordering from large suppliers, so increased workload was a concern. Most buyers wanted to be able to follow a similar procedure by dealing with as few producers as possible and routinely submitting some type of order form. Other primary concerns included: reliability of routine delivery to the business, competitive pricing, cleanliness, packaging, product guarantee and availability due to weather, and how to address the seasonal availability of most vegetables in this region. Other lesser concerns included food safety, health department compliance, and consistency in size and quality. Contacts made in conducting the surveys raised local awareness levels and will be helpful for producers who choose to take the initiative to direct market their own products.

Another idea that has been well received in the Siouxland area is the development of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects. In the spring of 2001, three producers started the first CSAs in the area with assistance from Sioux Rivers RC&D. The exact structure of each varied, but in general each one sold advance "memberships" in return for a plentiful and varied supply of vegetables through the summer until a frost occurred.

A difficult and challenging aspect of the project was attempting to establish a producer network. Producers are reluctant to get involved

until they are sure that such an effort will be successful and they wanted "other" producers to make the first move, creating something of a stalemate. A small group of producers will serve on a steering committee to explore how to create a formal network of producers to support local food system marketing efforts.

## Conclusions

The first overall lesson the project staff learned was to have patience. Gathering information and networking took longer than anticipated. Working with producers also took patience because many of them were hesitant to believe anyone really wanted to help them market their products for free with no strings attached. Getting publicity for the project also was difficult. The media was not familiar with many of the concepts and ideas the project was trying to promote and didn't readily understand the potential impact the locally grown food market could have on the region.

The buyers' concerns, along with the apprehensive attitudes of producers, suggested the need for a position similar to a broker. This person could be the one contact that buyers would greatly appreciate and could also act as a marketer/promoter for producers. Having one person in this position would also make it easier to work with the diversity of vegetable food products that can be produced in the area. Discussions on how to form an equitable partnership to market products that vary so greatly in quantity, value, and demand were frustrating and deterred the progress of the overall marketing effort.

Marketing vegetables was much more complex than marketing meat products. Meat has been processed, frozen and marketed for long enough that there is a system which producers can access routinely. Prices of meat products are easily found and allow producers to quickly

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compare their production costs to determine the feasibility of a particular business venture. Vegetables, on the other hand, have not been produced, processed, or marketed on a large enough scale in this region to be able to predict how much risk would be involved in creating a local vegetable production/supply operation.

Sioux Rivers RC&D helped obtain a Rural Business Opportunity Grant to conduct a fea-

sibility study that potentially will answer some of these questions related to production, processing and marketing of vegetable products in the Siouxland area. That information should be available in June or July of 2002.