



LEOPOLD CENTER
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Strengthening the local and regional food system in the Iowa Valley

Abstract: Local leaders, residents, and food producers band together to form a collaborative food system in the Iowa Valley region.

Question & Answer

Q: How do we stimulate interest in local foods in Iowa?

A: This project showed that widespread interest exists among Iowa Valley policy makers, consumers and citizens in promoting production of local foods and in facilitating their sales and distribution to local consumers. There is an increasing demand for local food in this region, and a growing network of producers that can be utilized as a resource for new producers. This project also has identified problems as well as opportunities for local food producers, and laid the groundwork for addressing areas of concern.

production into a formal coalition with a clear vision, mission and strategic plan to coordinate and strengthen local and state food distribution efforts on a regional level; and

- Demonstrate the effectiveness of a regional local food initiative in strengthening local efforts through two specific local food projects to be used as a resource and model in the Iowa Valley.

Approach and methods

To facilitate connections between local producers and consumers, I-Food developed a comprehensive local foods directory for the region. To encourage dialogue and networking, local producers were invited to attend all I-Food meetings, as well as the Sustainable Ecological Economic Development (S.E.E.D.) and Iowa Network for Community

Background

The Iowa Valley RC&D began coordinating efforts among key leaders and food system stakeholders in 2002. The work culminated in the launch of the Iowa Valley Regional Food Initiative in January 2007. The main goal of this initiative is to develop a regional food system plan and a framework to support local food efforts in the six-county Iowa Valley Region (Benton, Iowa, Johnson, Linn, Poweshiek and Tama counties).

The central objectives of the Iowa Valley Regional Food Initiative (known as I-Food since May 2007) have been to:

- Bring together key local champions representing a cross section of people with an interest in local food



I-Food meeting held February 2007 in Cedar Rapids

Principal Investigator:

Alexander Moffett
Iowa Valley RC&D
Amana

Budget:

\$10,000 for year one



I-Food Social and Cultural Subcommittee shown at the INCA Conference in Cedar Rapids February 2008

Agriculture conferences in Cedar Rapids. Participating producers, consumers and interested citizens received regular communications about I-Food and its activities. I-Food collaborated with the Northeast Iowa RC&D to develop a web-based template that allowed Iowa consumers to contact and order directly from area producers.

I-Food sponsored eight large group meetings between February and December 2007 specifically to develop a local food system plan. Four subcommittees, created through the group meeting process, began exploring specific aspects of local food system formation. Their work will inform further food system advancements.

Results and discussion

A measure of the initiative's success can be seen in the strong support received from the Iowa Valley community. What began as a core group of four partners has grown to a coalition of more than 140 engaged partners and collaborating organizations.

Key successes of the project include:

- The partnership between Kalona Organics and Metro High School (Cedar Rapids) through which locally grown food is provided to alternative high school students who then learn about the benefits of local food and how to prepare healthy meals at home,

- The integration of local food into the menus in the Iowa City Community School District, and
- Joining with the Northeast Iowa RC&D to connect local food producers and consumers via the Internet.

I-Food provided coordination among existing local food enterprises and programs to create a systems plan for the area. The work of the first year has led to offers of new support from the Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation, the Northwest Area Foundation, the Ben and Jerry's Foundation, and local government.

Conclusions

I-Food representatives researched, networked and planned for the development of a comprehensive local food systems plan. This effort was directed by the staff of the Iowa Valley RC&D and facilitated by independent consultant Penny Brown Huber. Utilizing the initial research conducted by the Crossroads Center and its own subcommittee's extensive exploration of all aspects of the local food situation, I-Food has made tremendous strides toward completing a plan for a sustainable local food system. Work will proceed in 2008 with completion of the plan and sharing of findings through the news media, the web site (www.ivrcd.org), presentations, and public meetings.

Impact of results

The work of I-Food has served as a catalyst for local food efforts, generating considerable excitement for the region's local food offerings. Participants have found the local food situation to be much richer and more complex than originally anticipated, due to the overwhelming response to this effort from a diverse set of local partners and organizations, each of whom brings different concerns and issues to the table. This response has led to an expanded I-Food effort and more outreach activities. Programs such as the one at Metro High School (Cedar Rapids) led to involvement with underprivileged children and local food sources.

Education and outreach

Articles about the project appeared in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, *Grinnell Herald-Register*, and the *Daily Iowan*. Two posters detailing the culinary, medicinal and other cultural uses of native plants have been widely distributed in the

region and used at I-Food related events. They show “Heritage Plants of the Iowa River Valley” and “Edible Wild Plants of the Mesquakie Nation.”

I-Food supporters have made presentations at a variety of regional and statewide events. Among them were six area Iowa Farm Bureau Federation chapter meetings, the S.E.E.D. conference, the Grinnell Area Local Food Alliance, Iowa Network for Community Agriculture conference, Practical Farmers of Iowa conference, Sustainable Table

program, the Leopold Center MFSI workshop, and an Iowa Farmers Union event.

Leveraged funds

Additional funds have been received from the Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation, and further funding is pending from the Linn and Johnson County Boards of Supervisors, the Ben and Jerry’s Foundation, and the United Way of Central Iowa.

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