



# South Central Iowa Area Partnership, Local Foods Network

**Abstract:** The project explored various ways to expand and promote local food enterprises and consumption in south central Iowa.

**Q** How can we help local producers network and reach more markets effectively?

**A** Many local producers are using direct marketing (as well as local markets) and this project tried to help them aggregate and coordinate these efforts with a collection point for the Iowa food cooperative and other DM outlets, ultimately assisting both consumers and producers to connect with these market outlets.



**MARKETING**

## Background

The project was a joint venture started by the South Central Iowa Area Partnership (SCIAP) agriculture development committee, an organization including economic development, farm, and community leaders from six counties – Decatur, Clarke, Lucas, Madison, Union and Wayne. This project also reached participants in Marion, Monroe, Ringgold and Warren counties.

Primary objectives of the project were to:

1. Implement an educational effort on the importance of local foods, the opportunities for producers and the benefits to local consumers in the six counties.
2. Study the feasibility of a South Central Iowa Local Foods Network, to link the efforts of 20 area food producers.

## Approach and methods

Project delivery strategies were created by local producers and SCIAP leadership with adjustments after receiving input from local growers. The project focused on coordinating efforts among growers, providing educational support to them, and reaching out to partners in central Iowa. Some key project activities were to:

- Identify producers currently involved in direct-to-consumer marketing,
- Conduct research on local consumer interest,
- Study the development and impact of local food systems,
- Assist networking among producers and consumers, educate them about local foods, and
- Evaluate strategies for targeted marketing by SCIAP producers.

The “Taste of Southern Iowa” local foods event was held September 13, 2011 in Chariton where more than 175 people attended the buffet meal and social hour at Carpenter’s Hall. Thirty-four local producers and vendors participated. The event included a social hour, where participants sampled foods and locally produced beers and wines, and visited with the local food vendors, as well as a banquet featuring locally produced ham and beef, locally grown vegetables and fruits, and desserts.

## Principal Investigator:

**H. Joseph Sellers**  
ISU Extension and  
Outreach  
Chariton

**Budget:**  
\$12,333 for year one

Local sponsors included Tourism Lucas County, Lucas County Development Corporation, South Central Iowa Area Partnership, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach – Lucas County, and Thelma Saxton, Carpenter’s Hall.

## **Results and discussion**

The project leaders found that 15 local producers already were members of the Iowa Food Cooperative and they also market to other venues in central Iowa. The producers and local consumers suggested increasing coordination between southern and central Iowa production efforts. Initial efforts included:

- A coordination, aggregation and distribution hub in Chariton or Osceola, and
- Recruitment of consumer members in south central Iowa.

Ongoing discussions with producers and food entrepreneurs showed considerable interest in the “shared-use kitchen incubator” concept. A study also identified training and education needs that will be addressed in 2012. Next steps in both the distribution planning and study of the shared use kitchens are more in-depth evaluation of both and creating business models that are economically feasible.

## **Conclusions**

- Local economic development leaders and producers are interested in continued cooperation and coordination of efforts.
- The community kitchen concept deserves more study, in partnership with central Iowa ventures.
- Local leadership will establish a delivery and distribution point for local producers and consumers to access local foods from the Iowa Food Cooperative.
- It is important to continue to partner with other groups with more staff and resources to create opportunities for local producers.
- The “Taste of Southern Iowa” has gained momentum and will be repeated in Chariton, and recreated in other southern Iowa locations in 2012.

Further work needs to be done to set directions for this group, and determine how SCIAP fits with other efforts in central Iowa, the Creston area, Albia and Fairfield. A membership campaign to enlist southern Iowa membership in the Iowa Food Cooperative started in April 2012. A collection and distribution site has been selected in Chariton, where there is another potential site. Twice-a-month delivery dates will serve producers and consumers in the region.

A study (funded by the Leopold Center) on shared-use kitchens is being done in partnership with Valley Junction, Sherman Hill, and Chariton ventures. Results and the amount of commitment will determine future efforts by the investigator.

## **Impact of results**

The project addressed the objectives as identified by the stakeholders. There was good response to the educational programming and networking efforts, particularly for the business skills building exercises for producers, and awareness building and networking demonstrated by the “Taste of Southern Iowa.”

More than 40 producers were involved in ongoing project efforts. Overlap with

other projects initiated in Creston and Albia changed the focus of this project. There is great interest in coordinated efforts by local growers and consumers, particularly partnering with central Iowa local foods projects. At this time there is no consensus to build a local foods organization including dedicated staff and facilities. Instead, the emphasis is to stimulate growth of existing efforts and reach out to create new partnerships.

Continued development of aggregation/distribution and shared use kitchen projects, as well as promotional efforts such as “Taste of Southern Iowa,” will be continued by the local leadership team.

## **Education and outreach**

Educational and training needs were identified by local producers and subsequent activities were scheduled to meet their needs:

- “QuickBooks applications for farm businesses” - 4 workshops, 38 participants
- “Business Planning Class” – two held, 25 participants
- “Direct Marketing Workshops” – three held in 2010, 25 participants
- “Beginning Farmer Workshops” – two in 2011, 10 participants
- “Using Facebook for Business Marketing” - 12 participants
- “Regulations for buying and selling locally grown and/or processed foods” – 15 participants
- Three discussions and conference calls on shared-use kitchens
- Four discussions on opportunities for collection and distribution hubs with the Iowa Food Cooperative

The project organizers planned and conducted tours and meetings with stakeholders at the Iowa Food Cooperative delivery site, and in Fairfield with Hometown Harvest of Southwest Iowa. Stakeholders and producers are working with the project to continue social media marketing efforts, develop and sustain regional linkage for marketing efforts, and leverage website coordination.

Presentations have been made to the SCIAP board of directors, local economic development groups and civic organizations. Local media contacts included extension pre- and post-event articles for the “Taste of Southern Iowa” and information on the Iowa Food Cooperative partnerships.

### ***For more information, contact:***

*Joe Sellers, ISU  
Extension, 48293 Hy-  
Vee Road, Chariton,  
Iowa 50049; (641)  
203-1270, e-mail  
sellers@iastate.edu*

## **Leveraged funds**

The project continues to utilize funds from SCIAP. Other funding sources include the Iowa Department of Economic Development and local matches from economic development and Farm Bureau groups in Decatur, Clarke, Lucas, Madison, Union and Wayne counties. Current budget is for \$5,500 to assist this effort. SCIAP funds have been used to sponsor education programs, hire hourly and technical assistance, and do promotion. Funds have been committed for a half-time summer intern, to contract for work on networking among producers in the region and develop an aggregation/distribution plan. Other contributions came from Carpenter’s Hall (\$1,000 in kind, Taste of Southern Iowa), Iowa State University, Lucas County (\$1,000 in kind and direct), Tourism Lucas County, fees from participants (\$2,000), producers (\$1,000 of product) and local development and chamber groups.