



The Northeast Iowa Food & Farm Coalition

The Problem:

In 2005, agriculture commodity groups in Winneshiek County observed a disconnect between downtown businesses, local chambers and city administrators. They recognized the importance of telling the story of agriculture to area residents.

The Response:

ISU Extension was asked to facilitate discussions around the current state of agriculture in Northeast Iowa. Producers realized it wasn't about which commodity is better or more important to the area, it was about promotion and support of agriculture in general.

Ken Meter, an economist from the Crossroads Resource Center was invited to talk about "Finding Food in NE IA" and asked the group, "Why don't we grow our own food in the American Heartland?"

The Leopold Center suggested the group go through a strategic planning process. Through this process, the assets, strengths and opportunities of the area were identified as well as the barriers and challenges. The focus of the conversations quickly narrowed to food production as a strength in the area. The NIFF Coalition currently has members in Allamakee, Clayton, Chickasaw, Fayette, Howard and Winneshiek counties as well as Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Why Local Food Fits:

Northeast Iowa is an agricultural powerhouse with total sales of agriculture products reaching \$685 million each year. This area has 7417 farms ranging in size from 221 to 318 acres compared to the average Iowa farm size of 331 acres. Almost 60% of the farm income is from livestock production compared to the state average of 49%.

Farms in this area lead the state in direct food sales. According to the 2002 Ag Census, local farmers sold \$1.3 million dollars of food directly to consumers.

Consumers spend over 193 million dollars of this income every year on food. Fifty-six percent of that money is spent on food to each at home while the remainder is spent on food eaten away from home. Current local food sales account for about 1% of the total food sales.



The Impact:

Creation of a learning community.

The NIFF Coalition became the first pilot community selected in 2006 by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture's Regional Food System Working Group. Their initial three goals were to provide an opportunity for existing and new producers to diversify, to explore development of regional processing and storage facilities to add value to all agricultural products in the area, and to increase the consumption and sale of locally grown crops.



Developed a strategic plan. This plan was instrumental in their proposal submission to the W.K.Kellogg Foundation, and they were selected as the site of one of nine Food and Fitness initiatives across the U.S. The work of the NIFF Coalition has since been integrated into the NE Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative (FFI).

Facilitated institutional purchases of produce, dairy, and meat products. Through the work of the NIFF Coalition and RFSWG, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship clarified its policy on the use of local food by institutions, including schools, care centers and hospitals, and these buyers are again purchasing local fruits and vegetables.

Expanded the growing season. In 2008, increased buying interest from institutions led to a local wholesale and retail horticultural company to convert almost three acres of greenhouse space into a home for several types of vegetables and fruits.

Engaged Schools. The availability of off-season produce in the greenhouses led local school districts to realize they could purchase local food for approximately nine months out of the year. As of the spring of 2009, the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative is collaborating with the school system to provide children and their families access to healthier food options.

Increased commitment to buying local. Luther College, a local private college in the region, will contract with local producers for seven high volume food products in 2009, and has committed to purchasing 35% of its food from local producers by 2012.

Leverage funding and expertise: In two years, the initial \$20,000 provided by the RFSWG in 2006 to support the NIFF Coalition has leveraged approximately \$1.2 million in food and fiber infrastructure and resources for the region. This includes investment in greenhouses, apple and pear trees, grapes, poultry expansions, garden expansions, honey bee production, farm stand marketing, construction of packing sheds, hydroponic production, and much more. By tracking the purchases of four to five institutions in the last two years, the NIFF Coalition has realized an increase of more than \$377,000 in local food purchases.

Find additional information on the NIFF Coalition: www.niffcoalition.org or www.iowafreshfood.com

... and justice for all.

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