



FROM FARM TO MARKET

Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan Connects Eaters and Producers

BY RENEE BRINCKS

Farmers at a post-harvest handling workshop that the Leopold Center sponsored at Black's Heritage Farm, Ames.

Thanks to \$75,000 in seed money from the Iowa Legislature, a statewide push to make local foods more widely available in stores, schools and senior centers is taking root.

In 2010, lawmakers asked leaders at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture to outline policies and programs that would boost local and regional food systems across the state. Those ideas were presented to the legislature in January 2011, and in July, the Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan received approval.

Craig Chase, Iowa State University Extension farm management specialist and interim marketing program leader at the Leopold Center, heads up Local Food and Farm Plan efforts. Organizations from around the state are involved with the project, including the Iowa Food Systems Council, Practical Farmers of Iowa, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and the Iowa Farmers Union. In addition, more than 1,000 producers, consumers, retailers and other interested individuals provided feedback during the program's development.

"The Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan has 29 operational recommendations divided into six sections," says Chase. "[We look at] major barriers in the way of really developing a vibrant food system in

Iowa, and then at what we should do to try and eliminate these barriers."

The plan's six major concerns are business development and financial assistance, processing, food safety and issues relevant to beginning, minority and transitioning farmers, plus program assessment and implementation of local food incentives. Industry leaders appointed to each section have been directed to assess current accomplishments and challenges, identify what is needed for further success and recommend steps to move efforts forward.

Chase and his colleagues will present a preliminary progress report to the legislature in early 2012, followed by a final report next June. He expects to address most, if not all, of the 29 recommendations by then. While only one year of funding was designated for these efforts, discussions about making the Local Food and Farm Plan a self-sustaining, long-term program are already in progress.

As plan development partners explored challenges to food production and distribution here and Iowa, they found concerns similar to those voiced elsewhere.

"The results that this plan came up with were very similar to what others are finding at the state and national levels," says Chase, citing comparable local food research in Ohio and North Carolina.

Food safety, for example, can be a barrier for small, independent producers looking to sell to schools or commercial outlets. Such operations don't always meet the standards required by buyers, so those farmers sometimes need training in topics such as handling and processing. Beginning and minority farmers who lack the capital required for conventional farming might find small-scale fruit or vegetable production a better fit. However, they often need direction on business plan development and working with lenders. And, lenders who understand the needs of corn, soybean, hog and cattle farmers might not know how to evaluate a business plan for a non-traditional vegetable farm or shared-use kitchen. Local Food and Farm Plan partners are creating programs to address such issues.

As they break down barriers to entry for producers, Chase and his cohorts also are working to make local foods more readily available.

"When you think about local foods, a lot of people automatically envision a farmers' market or a CSA (community-supported agriculture). What they don't often envision is being able to go to a mainstream grocery store or food outlet and find a wide variety of local foods available," he says.

Des Moines-based Hy-Vee, which has more than 230 grocery stores in Iowa and seven surrounding states, encourages its store managers to purchase from local producers.

"We like buying locally for a variety of reasons," says Michael Smith, Hy-Vee director of real estate and sustainability, and a participant in some Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan development sessions. "It tastes better. It's less energy intensive. Our customers want it. We think that it provides a stronger and more stable economic base for the farmers in Iowa."

Though Hy-Vee stores have partnered with local farmers for more than 80 years, some issues still limit how much homegrown produce makes it to shelves. Smith points to consistent product quality, food safety and supply, in particular.

"There is an issue of aggregation," he explains. "If I'm a produce manager at a 30,000-square-foot store in Ottumwa, Iowa, I can't have five or 10 or 12 farmers coming to me and trying to sell. And, nine times out of 10, those farmers won't be able to source consistently unless they're a big producer."

To address those concerns, Local Food and Farm Plan leaders have been promoting the development of food hubs, or facilities where individual farmers combine their meat and produce with the goal of creating enough supply to meet buyers' demand.

"As long as the creation is consistent, the packaging is consistent and the handling of the product is consistent, then the combined produce can be shipped to a buyer. If a buyer wants 1,000 pounds of potatoes, it may take five or 10 different producers to get that amount. The food hub is a place where that happens," says Chase.

Enhancing farm-to-school efforts is another focus of the Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan. The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship currently oversees about 15 farm-to-school chapters statewide, and Chase is working to integrate additional schools that already maintain gardens, local producer connections and other related programs.

Lyn Jenkins manages grant-funded nutrition education programs for 27 elementary schools in the Des Moines Public Schools district. She reaches some 12,000 students in kindergarten through fifth-grade with "pick a better snack" lessons, fruit and vegetable tastings, local produce displays and take-home recipes for families.

"The feedback from parents and past focus groups shows that they definitely want to buy healthy foods. They just need a little bit more support in what to do with them once they get them home," she says. "We're really trying to show families how they can get these foods and how they can afford them."

In Des Moines, Jenkins sources produce for her programs from places such as Gateway Market, The Homestead, Williams & Sons Orchard and local farmers market vendors. She says schoolchildren enjoy meeting the growers, and many are surprised to learn where their food really comes from.

"I grew up in Iowa, in more of a rural area, and we had a garden. A lot of these students in Des Moines don't have that connection. Even though we live in an agricultural state, they still don't know that carrots grow under the ground," explains Jenkins. "Those 'a-ha moments,' when they realize where things come from, and that nutritious foods can taste good and look good and be grown right in their own backyards, it's pretty exciting. You can see the sparks in their eyes as they start making those connections."

Those connections – between children and their food, between growers and retailers, between producers and consumers – are one measure of the Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan's success. As production, distribution, marketing and consumption of local foods takes off, Chase anticipates that new agricultural jobs and new opportunities also will crop up.

He expects the program's benefits to extend far beyond the obvious, as well.

"The Iowa Food and Farm Plan is not an Iowa State University initiative. It is a statewide initiative of grassroots organizations," he says. "You've got 1,000 different people going in 10,000 different directions... One of the advantages of developing our working groups is that not only are you the learner, but you're a teacher at the same time. It allows everyone to ask questions and share information."

For news and information about the Iowa Local Food and Farm Plan, visit the program website at

Leopold.IAState.edu/marketing/iowa-local-food-and-farm-plan

See Some Green

Become an Edible Partner and watch your business (and Iowa) grow!

edible
IOWA RIVER VALLEY

Marketing opportunities are available for forthcoming issues. Call 319.337.7885 or email Kim@EdibleIowa.com



Classic Smiles

Complete Family Dental Care
Accepting new patients • Easy parking
Near campus • Gentle dentistry

Stephanie Nowysz DDS MS

611 East Burlington Street Iowa City
(319) 354-5550
www.classicsmiles4u.com



SEASONAL MENU

There's a reason they
keep coming back.

Pepper Sprout
MIDWEST CUISINE

KEEPING YOUR PALATE INTERESTED SINCE 2002
378 MAIN | DUBUQUE, IOWA | WWW.PEPPERSPROUT.COM | 563.556.2167