

We are all connected to food, however very few of us feel a connection with our food. The concept of a local food system is food that is grown, processed, and sold locally. This is better for farmers, communities, the environment, and our health.

Many people see food as a linear process from farm to table, stopping only to be processed in factories, distributed by trucks, and sold by stores. However, a local food system changes this process into a circular effort that involves communities and local connections. The connection between food and farming in NE Iowa can make our whole region a better place to work and live.

In order to understand the current status of the local food movement in NE Iowa, we need to take some time to learn more about the work of the Northeast Iowa Food & Farm Coalition or NIFF Coalition. The NIFF Coalition is a group of people who care about the future of agriculture in NE IA.

Their story starts in November 2005 when agriculture commodity groups in Winneshiek County met to talk about telling the story of agriculture. The producers saw a disconnect between downtown businesses, local chambers and city administrators. They recognized the importance of telling the story of agriculture to area residents.

As the conversations continued, they invited all areas of agriculture production to participate. Producers eventually came to the realization that it wasn't about which commodity is better or more important to the area, it was more about promotion and support of agriculture in general.

Some of the farmers had previously heard a speech by Ken Meter, an economist from the Crossroads Resource Center. He specializes in producing data for different regions of the country and he was invited to talk about "Finding Food in NE IA." He presented some shocking data about the current state of the ag economy. Despite becoming more efficient and more cost effective in their farming operations, farmers are continuing to struggle financially. Then Meter posed the question, "Why don't we grow our own food in the American Heartland?"

Around the same time these conversations were taking place, Fred Kirschenmann from the Leopold Center echoed the group's thinking, "It is becoming increasingly difficult for Americans to ignore the fact that we may be entering an era that will force agriculture to change more in the coming decades that it has in the last half century."

Instead of waiting for agriculture to change, the group contacted the Leopold Center. They suggested that stakeholders go through a strategic planning process. Over 30 people participated in the conversations that included farmers, ag lenders, processors, agribusiness professionals, non-profits and agency staff from Allamakee, Winneshiek and Howard counties.

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. We already had farmers producing and marketing food at the local, regional and national levels and we already had outlets for direct sales of local foods at farmers markets, CSAs and a food coop.

The strategic plan was completed and shared at three public meetings in the region attended by over 80 citizens who provided input and gave overwhelming support to the plan. In subsequent meetings, the stakeholders met to discuss the next steps. Soon the group had a name and developed a mission to support the development and marketing of locally grown agricultural products to enhance the lives of local citizens. At this time producers and leaders from Fayette and Clayton counties were invited into the conversations.

Since that time, the NIFF Coalition has completed several assessments to get a better idea of purchasing patterns, marketing, assets, and economical impacts of foods. The Coalition has also developed activities in the area to raise awareness of the many benefits of local food.

The work on a local food system was very attractive to the W.K.Kellogg Foundation and was a significant reason why NE IA was named one of nine Food & Fitness Initiatives in 2007.

Why Local Food Fits

Northeast Iowa is an agricultural powerhouse with total sales of agriculture products reaching \$685 million each year. This area has 6420 farms ranging in size from 253 to 309 acres compared to the average Iowa farm size of 350 acres. Over sixty percent of the farm income is from livestock production compared to the state average of 50%.

As we look at the other strengths in the area, several assets stand out. This area leads the state in organic production with \$3.5 million in sales. These five counties have 10% of the certified organic farms in the state which account for 26% of the state's organic sales. Farms in this area are leaders the state in direct food sales. According to the 2002 Ag Census, local farmers sold \$915,000 of food directly to consumers.

Residents in this area earn 1.29 billion dollars each year (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2002). They spend over 193 million dollars of this income every year on food. Fifty-six percent of that money is spent on food to eat at home while the remainder is spent on food eaten away from home. Current local food sales account for less than 1% of the total food sales. Imagine if 2% of those food sales could be from local sources...or 10%?

The NIFF Coalition and the NE Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative (FFI) are working together to create community environments that support access to fresh, locally grown, healthy, affordable food and safe environments for physical activity and play. More information about these programs can be found at www.iowafoodandfitness.org.

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What's in a Name?

NIFF: Northeast Iowa Food & Farm Coalition, formed in 2006 to support the development and marketing of locally grown agricultural products to enhance the lives of local citizens.

FFI: Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation is funding NE Iowa and the other eight communities to create eight-year community action plans that will improve the environments that impact their communities' health and quality of life.