

# Forging a Strategic Plan for a Stronger Local Farm & Food Economy in NE IA

April 2006

## Introduction:

“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 than it has in the last half century,” wrote Fred Kirschenmann, director of the Leopold Center in December 2005.

Instead of waiting for agriculture to change, citizens in Northeast Iowa are working to shape the future of agriculture in their region by creating and implementing a strategic plan that will develop new and nurture existing food and fiber enterprises in the three county region of Allamakee, Howard and Winneshiek counties. This goal was realized by bringing 25 stakeholders together to draft a strategic plan. Stakeholders included commodity producers, community supported agriculture growers, lenders, market gardeners/orchard growers, extension agents, retailers, independent meat processors, and fund raisers. Stakeholders developed an initial plan and held three public meetings in the three county region attended by over 80 citizens who provided input and gave overwhelming support to the plan.

The three major goals for the strategic plan include: 1) Provide an opportunity for existing and new producers to diversify; 2) Explore the development of regional processing and storage facilities to add value to all agricultural products in the area; and 3) Increase sale consumption of locally grown food on a local, regional and national level.

According to recent publication by Iowa State University, “the local food system is one of the fastest-growing, most promising markets in agriculture today. The concept behind local food is based on one central idea: when food is grown, processed, and sold locally, it is better for farmers, better for communities, better for the environment, and – in both taste and nutrition – better for you.”

A Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition has been formed to begin implementation of the strategic plan designed to build a stronger local food and farm economy in Northeast Iowa. The Coalition’s mission is to support the development and marketing of locally grown agriculture products to enhance the lives of local citizens. The Coalition’s purpose is to assist in local food production, distribution, sales and consumption on a local, regional and eventually a national scale, including serving as a source of food the Minneapolis/Twin Cities market due to their relative close proximity and high population.

Below is the strategic plan that was developed:

**Project Goal:** Create a strategic plan to develop new, and nurture existing food and fiber enterprises, in the three-county area.

**Objective:** Create and write a strategic plan to develop new and nurture existing food and fiber enterprises for the three county area.

## Goal 1) Provide an opportunity for existing and new producers to diversify.

**Capacity:** All ag producers

**Payoffs:** More profit

**Risk:** Need to change; Markets are still being established

**Committee:** Teresa Wiemerslage, Mark Stock, Jeremy Peake, John Palmar, Mary Steen, Eric Nordschow, Don Elsbernd, Dennis Hovden, Eric Helgersen, Scott Webb

**Strategy 1:** Identify alternative ag enterprises, existing groups, markets

**Task a:** create a directory of producers/processors for 3 county region

**Task b:** support existing and develop new cooperatives to support networking

**Task c:** identify research possibilities for area and recruit producers & researchers to establish a track record.

**Strategy 2:** Establish mentor system to pair transitioning farmers with existing producers in niche/alternative ag enterprises

**Task a:** establish venture capital fund for financing

**Task b:** establish livestock/rental programs

**Task c:** establish regional beginning farmer network – pairing up producers and farms

**Task d:** establish regional website network or listserves for producers and consumers

**Strategy 3:** Educate producers on alternative ag enterprises through meetings, field days, tours, etc.

**Task a:** use panel of producers to speak about experiences

**Task b:** provide basic marketing and financing classes to help producers become more comfortable with risks

**Task c:** use panel of locker owners, coop owners to talk about demand of products

**Goal 2) Explore development of regional processing and storage facility(ies) to add value to all ag products in the area**

**Capacity:** Coop of producers; local financing; grants; local lockers; Sno-Pac; Integrity Mills; Oneota Coop; GROWN Locally; etc. for outside experts.

**Payoffs:** Boost local economy; build community; create jobs; save energy; improve land use; make families profitable; model for other communities.

**Risk:** Time and energy to explore idea with no payoff.

**Committee:** Charlie Baier, Jodi Peake, Al Peake, Jon Jensen, Rich Lukes

**Strategy 1:** Assemble a group of experts from various processors (locker, dairy, fruit & vegetable processing; grain processing)

**Strategy 2:** Research successful models from other communities

**Strategy 3:** Coordinate with producers and retailers/marketers to determine viability

**Strategy 4:** Develop a recognized distributor/distributors within the region that can meet the immediate needs of the area as far demand, name recognition and production quality. This distributor may be the expansion of an existing local market such as Oneota Coop. This could be one or several depending on ability of the distributor to handle different types of products. (Keep in mind diversified production for diversified consumption and distribution. This would include meat, dairy, fruit and vegetables, canned and processed products.)

**Goal 3) Increase sale consumption of locally grown food on a local, regional and national level.**

**Capacity:** Already many local producers.

**Payoffs:** Establish local connection.

**Risk:** Will we produce too much?

**Committee:** Solveig Hanson, Rick Burras, Rachel Stiber, Teresa Steffens, Teresa Wiemerslage, Larry Grimstad, Mari Ann Duff, Liz Rog, Bill Welsh, Lora Friest

**Strategy 1:** Establish local markets

**Task a:** Identify ways to maximize existing markets (work with GROWN Locally, Oneota Coop and other distributors to find out where they need help to succeed/expand.)

**Task b:** Facilitate incorporation of local foods into existing traditional local, regional and national distribution systems. (Remembering that local does not need to be organic; this means working locally with Quillans, Fareway, the restaurants, schools and nursing homes, etc. On a regional level it may be bigger distributors and nationally and internationally this would involve establishment of a regional identify for the foods – such as “Oneota Foods.” This also recognizes that local distribution systems wouldn’t be able to handle large scale production of any single food so regional and national markets must be established to handle overflow that will occur when larger producers may shift out of commodity crops.)

**Task c:** Compliment existing distribution systems with new infrastructure. These must be stable markets that are controlled locally and ensure equitable profit for profit for producers.

**Strategy 2:** Educate consumers about local foods

**Task a:** Launch a campaign that makes the food to farm connection and puts a face on farming or a face on food production. Include news releases, monthly articles in major local newspapers, public meetings, farm camp for kids, sample nights, posters, brand name identification “Oneota Foods”. Written, verbal and photographic/charts, etc. Develop brochures and meet with local businesses that could purchase local foods to establish the benefits with consumers. Include specific information in outreach efforts about:

- The economic benefits of the local foods purchase (dollar turnover)
- The health or nutritional benefits of local and organic foods.
- How to consume local foods – preparing fresh foods, eating in season, creating variety, canning, etc.

**Strategy 3:** Educate producers to produce what consumers want.

**Task a:** Quantify the current and potential markets for individual products.

**Task b:** Conduct outreach to the public via all traditional means.

**Task a:** Establish producer meetings to disperse consumer needs/wants information.

**Strategy 4:** Work with local leaders to enact legislation that recognizes and promotes local foods.

**Task a:** Invite legislators to the meetings to hear from this group and speakers.

**Task b:** Provide examples from them about what other areas/legislators are doing in this area.