PROGRESS REPORT: Advancing Iowa Local Food System Development through Community-based Partnerships and Integration of ISU Extension and Outreach Educational Efforts.

Objectives

This effort will strengthen campus/county connections as counties determine what local food educational programming/technical assistance is developed and delivered through a strategic planning process. This planning process involves non-Extension partners to enhance integration of community-based programming. It is anticipated that planning and programming will lead to the development and implementation of community-based food system projects.

Funding Awarded:

IFSWG Phase II: $99,995 (2-year project). Note: different aspects of this project started in May/June of 2013. This report reflects progress to date over the last 5-6 months.

Funding Expended to Date:

As of October 2013 (eData)
Cash balance - $86,994.88
Encumbrance - $19,846.83
Free balance - $67,148.05

Progress to Date

The IFSWG will conduct strategic planning sessions to determine the future directions of the working group. The first of these meetings, organized by Lynn Heuss and facilitated by ISU Extension and Outreach’s Andy Larson, took place on August 30, 2013 in the Waterloo-Cedar Falls area. A second meeting occurred that afternoon in the Cedar Rapids-Iowa City region. These meetings included ISU Extension and Outreach staff, Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) members and others currently engaged in the development of their local food system. Both groups developed different, geographically based goals. As this project progresses, it is likely that the plan of work among the IFSWG members will vary depending on regional needs. Follow-up meetings are scheduled in the Waterloo-Cedar Falls and Cedar Rapids-Iowa city areas in November 2013. Additionally, initial strategic planning sessions will occur in Mason City and Dubuque in winter 2013.

Expected intermediate-term outcomes identified as IFSWG goals are primarily related to work with external partners and will be a prime focus during this effort:

- Increased networking and sharing of resources among groups with similar focus,
- Strengthening of networks, and
- Development of new partnerships.
The IFSWG has given ISU Extension and Outreach staff opportunities to strengthen connections with external partners and increased opportunities for external partners to contribute to the work. Extension also is increasingly recognized by external partners as an important collaborator in local/regional food systems work. Overall, understanding what others within ISU Extension and Outreach and external partners are doing in local foods has decreased duplication of work already completed. An example of this is the new collaboration between the Regional Food System Working Group in Cedar Falls and ISU Extension and Outreach's Nick McCann in Northeast Iowa. Nick is helping the Waterloo RFSWG skip through several initial steps in the creation of a food hub to be located in Cedar Falls. Nick is also sharing information on distribution and aggregation. Through support of the IFSWG, Extension administrators' support of local food systems work has become more apparent among external partners, resulting in the growth of positive perceptions about Extension.

It is expected that IFSWG will move closer to meeting intermediate-term outcomes in the second year of implementation. The IFSWG aims to increase community capacity through the development of new and current partnerships. The groups will maintain the connections and dialogue among groups using various modes of communication and networking.

**Region 19**

The strategic planning process defined earlier is intended to ultimately have local food system projects identified regionally. To aid in understanding how that support may look and develop, IFSWG is partnering with Extension Region 19. Regional Director Sue Henderson and others have identified a specific local food system project. An expected outcome is that this pilot project will illustrate what types of resources and assistance county-based programs need for specific local food development projects. So as other regions identify projects through their strategic planning processes, IFSWG will be ready to assist them toward the accomplishment of their objectives.

This specific project in Region 19 will bring additional support through responsible food entrepreneurial development. Increasing the number of growers with mentorship and through collaboration will allow food systems to ensure a coordinated supply, with growers specializing in crops needed. Currently, one mentor has been identified and a personalized mentor program plan is being developed. Following completion of the plan, a mentee selection process will begin.

A local food coordinator was hired to assist with the networking and partnership development that naturally comes with local food system development. The coordinator conducted a local food sales survey gathering information from 7 farms and 14 institutional buyers. This survey was part of a statewide effort conducted by the Regional Food System Working Group. New partnerships were developed with agricultural, community, and family resource organizations in Appanoose, Monroe, and Wayne Counties. New educational programs and materials were delivered including Plant Grow Share and the local food guide.

**Next Steps**

The great strides made by the IFSWG and the sound plans already developed for this project indicate that there is great capacity for Extension to support local food systems development. The IFSWG evaluation suggests that one of the main factors in the future success of the group is its ability to build trust and credibility by approaching the work from a support/facilitation role as...
opposed to the more traditional “expert” model. Such an approach will require significant adjustments and commitment to different ways of doing things, including the following changes:

1. Training Extension staff to effectively facilitate rather than lead food systems development.

2. Framing Extension as a “partner” or “facilitator” as opposed to “leader” also will build trust with partners. There are many opportunities for doing this through public recognition of partners’ contributions in publications and at events. Extension employees also can be trained in professional development venues in how to appropriately recognize and credit partners for their work and learn what kinds of outcomes and opportunities are associated with doing so.

3. Another strategy for building trust is to invest modestly in producing joint informational materials clarifying what each of Iowa’s food system working groups does. This could yield high rewards in terms of increasing trust and respect for Extension and its role in supporting local food systems development.

4. Cultivating relationships with external partners also will lead to increasingly positive perceptions of Extension in local food systems development. ISU Extension and Outreach can build on momentum it already has in this area by hosting events to increase networking with partners or alternatively by supporting the participation of Extension employees in events and programs hosted by ISU Extension and Outreach’s partners.

ISU Extension and Outreach may need to overcome the natural tension that exists between Extension and some other groups that compete for the same sources of funding for local food systems development. There are several ways to do this. One option is to invite other organizations to partner with Extension in seeking grant funding. In addition, increasing Extension funding for local food systems work sends a clear message that Extension staff are supported by their own organization and therefore aren’t required to compete for funding with their community partners in order to be involved in local food systems work.

These are just some of the ways to strengthen the role of Extension as a responsive and capable servant leader in the growing local food system movement in Iowa. These actions will allow the IFSWG to transition into the next phase of its plan of work, to create a cohesive network of local food coordinators in the state of Iowa.