

# Report – Extension regional directors' involvement in food system work.

## Goals and Objectives

The popularity of local foods and the increasing data on its positive community economic impact has led several Iowa Extension regional directors to ask what their roles could be in supporting local food systems work. As a relatively new program area for county Extension offices, they are wondering- *how should a regional director be involved in cultivating county and regional local food development? What can they do within their scope of work to promote local food systems? What has been effective and what hasn't in establishing local food programming in the counties?*

Of the 20 current regional directors in late 2014, several are currently actively engaged in food system development. Their involvement varies from establishing local food related programming, to hiring local food coordinators or local food system interns. For these regional directors, convincing county councils and other community partners of the importance of local food systems work was a necessary step.

The following report aggregates information from interviews conducted in 2014 with six Iowa Extension regional directors already invested in local food systems work. The goal was to understand how and why they became invested in such work, what their main challenges were and the tools they used to overcome them. This report can then be used as a "best practices" or "lessons learned" guide for regional directors interested in supporting local food systems and asking the aforementioned questions.

## Results

### **Why are regional directors involved in local foods?**

- Interest/involvement prior to position as regional director (successful programming as county directors, out of state experiences, etc.).
- Needs assessments surveys (from counties or communities) listed the following:
  - Local foods as a priority, or
  - Economic development, health, nutrition and obesity, employment opportunities, community, development of value-added ag, which are all areas interconnected with and supported by community food system development.

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/localfoods/about/isu-involvement/>

- Producers have reached out directly to extension for farmers' markets, food safety training, value-added ag/business strategies.
- Involvement in other community groups (councils, advisory boards...) where food system issues were of interest.
- Local food is the perfect fit/niche for ISU Extension and Outreach:
  - No other organization is equipped the way extension is to promote local foods.
  - Agronomists, livestock specialists, etc.: all 'taken over' by private companies. Extension does not have a hidden agenda, and can support small diversified farms.
- Alignment with ISU Extension and Outreach's four signature issues
  - Economic Development
  - Food and the Environment
  - Health and Wellbeing
  - K-12 Youth Outreach

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### **The importance of partnerships**

Empirical evidence shows that regions where ISU Extension and Outreach partnered with other regional organizations were more successful in supporting and developing a sustainable regional food system. All of the regional directors interviewed had an active role in supporting multi-partner coalitions in their area and stressed their importance for moving efforts forward.

In several cases, a coalition built around food systems work already existed prior to the regional director's involvement. The regional director was then able to offer to be a partner in this work and provide valuable assistance with ISU Extension and Outreach's resources. Many Extension county employees and regional directors have found that the Iowa Regional Food System Working Group quarterly meetings are a great way to increase networking opportunities. For more information on these meetings and other coalition building resources, contact Lynn Heuss at [leheuss@iastate.edu](mailto:leheuss@iastate.edu).

### **Approaching your county council**

- Start with an "informal discussion":
  - With each council individually
  - Collectively as a region – create a 'focus group' or advisory board with one member from each county for further discussions.
- Work with 'local food champions' on boards in each county to help convince the rest of the board.
- Things that help 'sell' the idea of involvement with local foods:
  - Show county councils what is in it for them (*helpful economic impact report*– <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/localfoods/resources-2/economical-impacts-of-local-foods/> )
  - Enthusiasm is easily transmittable. Make sure the person 'pitching' local foods to councils is passionate and communicates well.

- One regional director mentioned that it was not hard convincing county councils to hire a regional local food coordinator since they had already hired multi-county positions in more 'traditional' roles.
- Another way to increase staff investment in local food work is by modifying job descriptions when hiring for 'traditional' positions. County councils are easy to convince since the new set of responsibilities align with the community's needs assessments results (economic development), and do not require additional funding. Local food work seems like a logical fit for positions such as agricultural educator or horticulturalist.
- Bridge funding: a few regional directors were able to receive supplemental funding through the VPEO's strategic initiative, local hospitals, local school districts or partnerships with other local nonprofits (RC&Ds). This allowed these regions to hire coordinators or interns at a lower investment for a period of time. The hope is that county councils will then see the benefits of investing in local food work after a year or so, and be more willing to take on most of the cost of the position, creating more financial stability for local food positions going forward.

## Challenges

- Sustainable funding is one of the major challenges with local food development. However, as more work is done, results and proof of positive impacts will increase, leading to more accessible, reliable funding. Supplemental funding opportunities in local foods:
  - Local Foods Program webpage on Funding Opportunities: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/localfoods/funding-opportunities/>
  - USDA guide to Sustainable farms, ranches and communities: <http://www.sare.org/Learning-Center/Books/Building-Sustainable-Farms-Ranches-and-Communities>
- High turnover rate of local food staff because of the nature of the position being short-term (Rising Star intern), unstable funding (grant reliant), or lack of support for the position.
- Need more 'boots on the ground' work in addition to long-term community building. FoodCorps/VISTA/AmeriCorps service members, interns, Master Gardener volunteers can help with this.
- Much of Extension is still heavily focused on production agriculture and therefore there are less resources, programming, and overall infrastructure available for this work in counties. Need to start recognizing the opportunities given by local foods, especially for beginning farmers.

## Local Food Coordinators

- Supplemental funding was helpful as a "bridge" funding before finding more sustainable streams of revenue. Allows county councils to see benefits and results, and helps convince them to 'chip in'.
- Regional director's roles vary from advisors to direct supervisors. None of the regional directors interviewed said hiring a coordinator has increased their workload (one more person to supervise). On the contrary, coordinators have allowed regional directors to step back into more of an advisory/liaison with councils' role.

- One challenge to be aware of is onboarding a local food coordinator when there are a lot of priorities and project ideas being thrown their way from the community, or when little local food work has been done in the area. This can be overwhelming for the coordinator, which is why new coordinators should quickly be included in existing networks (local groups, RFSWG, etc.).

## Measurable outputs used

Outputs allow regional directors to come to the councils with strong reports that support the local food system work. Some of the outputs measured by regional directors currently involved in local food work are:

- Number of educational outreach events.
- Programming opportunities offered.
- Total new partnerships and new populations reached/engaged.
- Reporting provided by local food coordinator (coordinator is expected to report like any other county staff), most often one report per county served.

For more information about local foods work within ISU Extension and Outreach, getting in contact with Extension regional directors actively engaged in community food system work, how to successfully hire and onboarding a new local food system-focused position, and any other related resources for engaging in local foods contact Caitlin Szymanski, program coordinator for the Local Foods Program ([szy@iastate.edu](mailto:szy@iastate.edu)) or our Local Foods Program team ([localfoods@iastate.edu](mailto:localfoods@iastate.edu)).

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