

Challenges of building a local food systems' infrastructure

Discussion Leaders: Morgan Doran, UCCE-Solano and Napa County and Shermain Hardesty, Small Farm Program Director

Wed, Dec 3 2008

11am-12pm

30 participants

Challenges of a local food infrastructure

As moderator, Doran first suggested that the session move from discussing problems in building local food system infrastructure to discussing the solutions possible for the problems presented.

Cindy Logan first asked if prices will provide a cap for local foods growth. Cindy Fake then presented the second problem that it is difficult to get producers to work together. It would be great if they pooled their money to match grant money or other investments to have a collaborative effort. An example is the need for packing sheds to make CSAs function. These efforts need cooperation between growers, but any sort of "cooperative" effort is not viewed favorably by growers. Kevin Cody asked what incentives for collaboration exist then. There need to be subsidies for smaller farmers to keep them in business, and subsidies for mass producers need to be stopped.

Wayne Kessler of Shasta then expressed that it is difficult to get information shared with established small farms. Getting information out is also a barrier for small farmers not in the loop. Good ideas will come from growers, not researchers.

Resources for small farmers

Ellie Rilla presented a few available resources as potential solutions to that problem: the Western SARE Small Farmer. In Shasta County it is also possible to go to the extension office to get help with small scale issues through workshops. Doran added that this is the time to communicate farmer needs to generate the resources to address those needs.

Discussion on small-scale farmer needs

Carol Fall said that farmers need technical and financial assistance. Lots of business classes don't apply to agriculture and the internet is a barrier in rural areas because broadband is not widely available.

Deb Giraud said that farmers are difficult to get together, but a facilitation training-such as a Board of Directors training-is helpful in being successful. It is hard to get farmers together, but it is also essential to make progress.

Most producers are not looking closely at the costs of production and marketing. Cindy Fake said that in Placer and Nevada counties they did a farm business training class and discovered that farmers did not pay themselves a salary. They are often not business or market oriented; they work in the business, but not on the business. Oftentimes, small agriculture loans are dependent upon a business plan and business training.

A farmer from west of Dixon said that if you want to buy or sell cattle small scale, a farmer used to have a number of different avenues for the slaughtering process. Now they are all gone. It is very difficult to do it independently anymore because all the alternative markets are gone.

Distribution in particular needs a lot of funding because you need a refrigerated truck, liability, and insurance. It is an expensive enterprise. There is the need to connect different links between production and post-production industries. Kevin Cody mentioned a co-op that has its own warehouse which could serve as a model addressing part of this problem.

A tangentially related problem is the example of a for-profit farm that uses apprenticeships and interns for the majority of its labor only to find out that their system was illegal. The farm paid its young farmers a stipend and provided living services, but not an hourly wage. This was against several labor standard acts and the farm had to pay a large fine. This is a serious problem for farms that rely on lots of labor from young

people who want to learn or friends who come simply to help. How will young people become knowledgeable about farming if they can't do an apprenticeship?

It was mentioned that this is also a problem for 4-H as an organization. If friends come to volunteer it is not acceptable with many insurance companies and the farmer risks losing his insurance. Paul from Heifer International also stated that this is a problem with immigrant farmers who use a lot of family members as their labor pool.

A partial solution was presented for using unpaid labor, which was for the farmers to sign up for a volunteer service which would help cover the costs of some insurance and liability. The example given was the Volunteer Network of Mendocino County. The farmer pays a minimal charge and the volunteers come from the service rather than going straight to the farm.

Imagining a local food infrastructure

A new challenge was then presented by Hank Herrera. The HOPE Collaborative is working to create access to healthy food to the low-income population in Oakland, CA. There is a large population in this urban center that only have access to supermarkets and local corner stores which don't sell fresh produce. The challenge is how to organize local growers to target this population, where there is a huge untapped demand, to sell 20 basic food products to 20,000 urban consumers. Herrera estimated that there is \$4 million worth of untapped sales each year. The demand is clearly there, but how would it be possible to organize the producers, the harvesting, the storage, and the distribution of that much produce?

One solution was also presented by Alex Dorsey to the problem posed by Hank Herrera. It would be valuable for organizations to conduct more economic feasibility studies to gain the statistics such as the \$4 million of lost profits to motivate farmers. The studies can be applied to many different areas. First it has to be proven that there is profitability and sustainability before action is taken. It is also important to remember that many communities are not that far away from farming, maybe one or two generations. There is the need to promote the image of the "new" farmer to communities so the conversation about local food and food production is different. People need to see themselves as partners in production so they value having farms in their community.

4-H developed because farmer advocate organizations couldn't get adults to listen so they went to the children. 4-H relies on the children to put the image of the "new farmer" into the minds of the adults and pass on new recommendations.

It was then said that it is easy to go back to the idea of cooperation and cooperatives, but current laws confine what is able to happen. They hinder cooperative formation instead. The laws for forming a cooperative are the same as the laws for corporations so there are large fees for simply joining as well as many other bureaucratic procedures. There is too formal a structure and it is not conducive to small farmers' needs. The fees and the effort required just to exist are too great for small farmers. It is also hard to get a farmer in the leadership role.

Land in Mendocino is tied up in high-value crops. Very few landowners are intercropping or would allow a CSA to be part of their land. The people who do it do it for personal reasons, to support local food. There is not a lot of economic incentive.

Potential solutions for increasing local food supplies

This wouldn't be the case if there were values put on what is are now external costs. These include environment benefits, landscapes, and consumer awareness of fresh produce. It is important in local food work to sell the other value of agriculture-not just lettuce, but a landscape that we want to live in, cleaner water, and a local economy. Farmers have to use the legislator as well to promote the positive side of farming. Farmers also have to do advocacy with their consumers. Legislators need to get rid of the "farmer as polluter" image (Cindy Fake).

Local banks in communities are a good source for farmers to seek assistance. Local credit unions can bring farmers together and provide services for cooperatives that they might not get elsewhere. Lately there has been the emergence of true community banks (Deb Giraud).

The next solution proposed was a local impact surcharge-a price premium put on food from China. This would help take local or statewide control of incorporating local food

into the food system. The money collected could go into supporting local food initiatives.

It is important to remember to set the example ourselves. Diana Cassidy's research is a good example to follow (Ellie Rilla). Another good example of what has already been done to promote local food is the newspaper insert from PlacerGROWN. It did a good job connecting people to the heritage of the county and their local food systems. Full cost accounting is needed. A good example is the book *Redefining Progress: Working toward a Sustainable Future* (Dave Campbell).

To conclude, Doran stated that we need to push the local foods agenda to the existing network of NGOs, government positions, and for-profit organizations. The local foods movement should try to diversify the network of people involved in agriculture. Ag tours are a good way to educate people and potential partners on the importance of local agriculture.