

Regional Food System Assessment Needed



By Melanie Bettenhausen,
Member Linkages
Director

'An ideal regional food system is one in which as much [good] food as possible to meet a population's food needs is produced, processed, distributed and purchased at multiple levels and scales within a region resulting in maximum resilience, minimum importation and significant economic and social return to all stakeholders in the region.'

Back in February, the North Coast Co-op and the Community Alliance with Family Farmers hosted a Food Security Forum (see the Spring 2010 issue of the Co-op News) in which community members came together to create action plans for improving our community food system.

As I learn more about other communities' food systems, I become more and more aware of the lack of knowledge about our own local food system.

Before we can truly make headway toward a goal of sustainability and self-reliance, we first need to assess where we are currently.

Inventory and mapping of our farms, ranches, dairies, processing facilities, cold storage, wholesale buyers, distributors, retailers, consumers and disposal sites would go a long way toward

informing our work.

A perfect example of such an assessment was done by Kathy Ruhf and Kate Clancy of the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, based in Belchertown, Massachusetts.

The result was a 91 page document titled "Northeast Farms to Food: Understanding Our Region's Food System", which includes everything from the size of farms to eating habits--it would seem no stone was left unturned.

Ruhf and Clancy write: "An ideal regional food system is one in which as much [good] food as possible to meet a population's food needs is produced, processed, distributed and purchased at multiple levels and scales within a region resulting in maximum resilience, minimum importation and significant economic and social return to all stakeholders

in the region."

I would like to see us, as a community, follow their lead.

We already have many organizations working on various components of the food system, but having the big picture would allow those same organizations to apply for greater funding, provide public officials with data for instituting policies and allow entrepreneurs to pursue more informed and less risky business opportunities related to the food system.

While the Co-op cannot undertake a project of this scale on its own, my hope is that community groups will collaborate and apply for funding so we can further the work of assessing our regional food system.

Please contact me if you have a collaborative opportunity to share.

Collaboration Between UCCE and California FarmLink Supports Novice Farmers/Ranchers



By Deborah Giraud,
Farm Advisor, UCCE

The University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) is working with California FarmLink to provide several new program areas to farmers:

- Matching mentoring farmers with beginning farmers,
- Searching for land for farmers to lease or buy
- Matching grants for farmers' savings

The latter Individual Development Account (IDA) will start in the fall and is brought to Humboldt County through a collaborative effort between UCCE, Arcata Economic Development Corporation (AEDC) and California FarmLink.

The IDA program is a way for farmers with less than 10 years of experience to start a savings account which will be matched with a grant at the end of 18 months.

A series of workshops, tailored to the needs of the eligible farmers will be part of the program.

The grant monies must be spent on a capital improvement for the farm business.

If you are a farmer interested in being matched with a mentor, want more information about the IDA program or have land that could be farmed, please call me at (707) 445-7351 or email ddgiraud@ucdavis.edu.

The UCCE office is at the foot of Humboldt Hill in the Humboldt County Agriculture building.



Co-op Employee Inspired to Start a Value Added Cooperative Kitchen



By Nate Wiesner,
Arcata Co-op
Deli Manager

There were also housing cooperatives that were working to create affordable homes for people.

The workshops covered a variety of topics, including starting, growing, marketing and the history of cooperatives, as well as CSA programs, credit unions, strategic planning, board of director's development, and the networking of cooperative businesses.

Several co-ops gave presentations, but two stood out for me.

Evergreen Cooperative in Ohio is creating a system for building locally owned and locally supporting companies that can build off of each other in sustainable ways.

Mondragon in Spain is supporting a billion dollars a year in sales, working on expanding into the U.S. by working with unionized United Steelworkers, and has effectively employed thousands of people. Go Co-op!

While attending the Natural Products Expo in Anaheim, I sat

in on a range of discussion groups from The Non-GMO Project to food security/food futures and met speakers like Bill McKibben (founder of 350.org) and Robert Kenner (director of Food, Inc.), all while networking with cooperative employees from all over the country.

The USDA was in attendance during a "Food Systems in Flux" talk, where they gave the current growth rates of farmer direct purchases (Farmers Markets, CSAs, etc.).

I was so excited to learn that it is one of the fastest growing markets in the country!

They are also rolling out programs to help with rural development through a series of grant possibilities for Value Added Producers, Rural Energy, Rural Cooperatives, and more.

In February I attended the North Coast Co-op's Food Security Forum where I sat in on two discussion groups: Local Foods Preparation and Distribution & Coordination in New Local Systems.

I have come to respect the potential cooperatives have to create sustainability and healthy growth in our communities.

There are so many great ideas coming out around these topics, so many people "going local" and a momentum we can capitalize on.

I hope we can start a Value Added Worker-Owned Cooperative Kitchen; one that preserves locally grown foods, uses agricultural byproducts to make stocks, supports family farms through the purchase of seconds and over-produced items, and then uses profits to help bring our local farmers' food to our children in their schools.

With the help of grants, the

cooperative idea of many hands helping, and commitment, I think we can make this happen.

As an employee of the North Coast Co-op and as a Director on its board I have seen great ways that our cooperative has given back, built and sustained our community and discovered that cooperation is everywhere!

I have come to respect the potential cooperatives have to create sustainability and healthy growth in our communities. The development of even more cooperatives that can support each other and local jobs, while sustaining sound financial structures, is essential as we move through our current economic climate.

Nourishing people has been my life, in so many ways, and now I would like to help build a way for us to preserve and develop our local food beyond our current successes.

If you would like to join me, please contact me at (707) 826-8670 ext. 114.