Northeast Iowa Food System Strategic Plan - Final

Introduction

The Northeast Iowa local food system has experienced tremendous growth over the past ten years, which is due, in part, to the careful planning and creative partnerships that were established to support this work. The local and regional food system is much stronger now than it was ten years ago. We have seen that when food is grown, processed and consumed locally, there are benefits for farmers, communities, the environment and our health. The purpose of this plan is to ensure an even stronger regional food system ten years from now.

The previous strategic plan was developed in 2006 and included three key strategy areas:
1) provide an opportunity for existing and new producers to diversify,
2) explore development of regional processing and storage facility(ies) to add value to all ag; and
3) increase sale and consumption of locally grown food on a local, regional and national level.

The Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition formed in 2006 to begin implementation of the strategic plan. Priorities from the 2006 strategic plan were then adopted by the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative (FFI) when it was funded and launched in 2007. The work of the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition became one of the FFI work groups.

Much has been accomplished since the 2006 strategic plan was created, including:

- Development of a regional, seasonal cycle menu for K-12 school lunch programs
- Two dairy processing facilities created within the region
- Luther College set and surpassed a goal to source 35% local food
- ISU Extension and Outreach declared local/regional food systems as a state program area
- Farm to Preschool integrated into all Head Start classrooms
- Iowa Food Hub was established in 2012 and has since returned over $1.5 million to farmers
- Iowa Food Hub is a Group GAP site offering food safety certification
- Over 24 school gardens created and supported
- Decorah Farmer's Market coupon program established, providing $45,000 to limited income families for fresh food since 2015
- 118 new jobs, 17 expanded jobs and 76 new local food producers/enterprises established
- Beginning Farmer Network formed
- Over $240,000 of local food sold to K-12 schools since 2008

This strategic plan seeks to expand on the great work that has already been accomplished since 2006 and to set a roadmap for the next ten years in the Northeast Iowa food system. It is our vision to provide opportunities for producers, strengthen aggregation and distribution networks to get product where it needs to go and to get good food into the homes of everyone in the region.

Shared Vision for the Regional Food System

The Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative has brought people in northeast Iowa together to make our region a place where every day, all people have access to healthy, locally grown foods and abundant opportunities for physical activity in the places where we live, learn, work and play. This vision statement focuses the work:

Northeast Iowa is a unique place where all residents and guests experience, celebrate, and promote healthy, locally-grown food and have abundant opportunities for physical activity and play every day.

Picture, if you will, a regional food system that is economically vibrant and growing. Farmers choose to work through the local food hub to assure that together they can meet commercial and institutional needs, while also assuring that every resident has access to affordable, healthy food. Local entrepreneurs are supported in establishing processing and storage facilities, and other value-added businesses, that make local food available all year round and attractive to buyers. We are nurturing a generation of new farmers. The number of farmers growing local food is expanding to meet growing needs. At the same time, leaders in the local food system have creatively implemented structures that assure community members with limited financial resources can afford to eat what is grown close to home.

Strategies and Tactics for Achieving Our Vision

In November 2016 and January 2017, more than 60 diverse stakeholders gathered on the Luther College campus to dream and strategize about the future of the food system in northeast Iowa. Stakeholders included commodity producers, community supported agriculture growers, lenders, market gardeners, extension agents, retailers, independent meat processors, community members, value added producers and staff from hospitals, schools, Iowa Food Hub, institutional food service, Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness, Iowa State Extension and Outreach, food pantries, and food banks.

Refer to Appendix A for a list of participants in the planning process.

The four key strategies for this plan include:

- Strategy 1: Increase sustainable production of local food throughout the region and engage more farmers in producing for regional markets.
- Strategy 2: Advance processing, aggregation, and distribution systems for local food to scale up and reach new markets.
- Strategy 3: Expand access to affordable and healthy local food for all people in the region.
- Strategy 4: Develop sustained funding for people and programs that support the regional food system.

Definitions

The words local, regional and sustainable are used throughout this plan. Recognizing that each institution should have the opportunity to define these terms for themselves as they go about setting goals and making purchasing decisions, this plan does not fully define these words. The following are ways in which the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative has defined these words when teaching children about the food system.

- Local - food grown close to home (grown or processed in the six county area)
- Regional - food grown or processed in the tri-state area
- Sustainable - economically viable, socially supportive, ecologically sound (good for farmers, families, communities, environment)

Strategy 1: Increase sustainable production of local food and engage more farmers in producing for regional markets.

- **1.1:** Recruit and encourage people from diverse backgrounds to become local food farmers and engage conventional producers to grow food at mid-scale.
    - Activities
        - Establish structures for passing on knowledge through apprenticeships, field days, and other programs.
        - Foster and support student-led school gardens in partnership with FFA to build excitement about local food farming within the next generation
        - Capture and strategically share small farm success stories as a way to make farming attractive to aspiring and beginning farmers and the next generation.
        - Support and encourage immigrant populations who know how to farm.
        - Encourage sustainable agriculture programs at NICC.

- **1.2:** Provide resources to local food farmers to help them start-up or expand local food production.
    - Activities:
        - Help local food farmers gain access to land and capital
        - Develop a system for sharing tools, labor, and resources
        - Promote policies to support local food farmers
        - Organize pasture walks, field days, farm tours, and workshops, including education on the various aspects of running a business.
        - Create and maintain positions for food systems technical advisers

- **1.3:** Create opportunities for local food farmers to build relationships, collaborate, learn, and share information with each other, and with key groups.
    - Activities:
        - Support and expand the beginning farmer network.
        - Create and enhance platforms (website, email lists, meetings) to facilitate collaboration and the sharing of information and resources between producers.
        - Provide apprenticeship, internship and mentorship opportunities.
        - Regularly bring farmers together to discuss market opportunities.
        - Collect data that demonstrates the effectiveness of using local food for economic development and share information with key groups.

- **1.4:** Expand and deepen local food system knowledge and expertise among regional organizations to further their ability to support local food farmers.
    - Activities:
        - Develop expertise for specializing in local food within other positions and institutions (lenders, insurance agents, tax accountants, economic development, etc).
        - Expand knowledge of local food systems within county extension offices.
        - Connect regional organizations with outside resources and expertise as a way to build capacity and develop local support networks.

***Strategy 2*: Advance processing, aggregation, and distribution systems for local food to scale up and reach new markets.**

- **2.1:** Develop and implement robust production planning systems so growers can satisfy demand from large buyers.
    - Activities:
        - Regularly gather buyers from restaurants, institutions, food hubs and grocery stores for seasonal planning meetings.
        - Integrate tools and technology that would be effective for planning and organizing production planning data.

- **2.2:** Coordinate trucking and storage logistics to increase efficiency of food chain partners.
    - Activities:
        - Engage in statewide food hub network and attend national food hub conferences to learn best practices and share lessons learned.
        - Develop food hub supply nodes and cross-docking nodes to provide market opportunities to more farmers
        - Develop a master map and easy online access to existing logistics, routes and schedules.
        - Support the exploration of cooperative local distribution networks.
        - Secure or create appropriate logistics technology to better manage the flow of goods in the regional food system.

- **2.3:** Enhance local food processing and storage systems that address challenges of seasonality and convenience.
    - Activities:
        - Network with local businesses and distributors to find ways of ensuring local products are available throughout the year.
        - Support the development of community kitchens and processing facilities.
        - Invest in processing, storage and packing infrastructure.

- **2.4:** Expand diverse markets that are appropriate for small and mid-size local food farms and consumers at all purchasing levels.
    - Activities:
        - Support development of a common brand.
        - Develop a toolkit and associated resources for institutions looking to start or expand local food purchasing.
        - Support purchases of healthy, local food by gas stations, convenience stores and small town grocery stores.
        - Explore feasibility of food hub affiliates in metro areas.

Strategy 3: **Expand access to affordable, healthy, local food for all people in northeast Iowa.**

- **3.1**: Incorporate healthy local food into businesses and institutions.
    - Activities:
        - Assist organizations with developing institutional policies and practices that support regional food systems and healthy food access.
        - Improve policies and practices in K-12 schools that increase access to healthy, local food
        - Enact policies at early education settings with greater nutrition standards and practices that increase access to healthy, local food

        - Support colleges and universities to set local food goals and institute policies and practices that support regional food systems and healthy food access.
        - Improve policies and practices that support local, healthy food within institutions that serve aging populations.
        - Increase availability of healthy, local food in gas stations, convenience stores and small town grocery stores.

- **3.2:** Engage people through marketing and educational programming about nutrition, wellness, and the food system.
    - Activities:
        - Support programming focused on cooking, gardening and nutrition.
        - Encourage businesses and institutions to create employee wellness programs that support local food production (e.g. CSA programs)
        - Work through company wellness programs to teach employees and families about purchasing local food and scratch cooking on a budget.
        - Support Farm to School activities in early childhood education and K-12 settings
        - Support marketing for healthy, local food in gas stations, convenience stores and small town grocery stores.
        - Develop a toolkit on providing healthy meals and snacks at community events
        - Develop consistent messaging and robust marketing strategy that ties key messages to beliefs and values within Northeast Iowa.

- **3.3:** Support organizations and initiatives that serve vulnerable populations to increase access to affordable, healthy, local food
    - Activities:
        - Continue partnership with Head Start to engage vulnerable children and families
        - Expand the use of EBT and farmers market coupon programs for the purchase of local food
        - Incorporate local food into meals prepared at senior meal sites, meals on wheels, etc.
        - Connect with immigrants through food pantries and free clinics.

Strategy 4: Develop sustained funding for people and programs that support the regional food system.

- **4.1:** Grow the FFI Endowment
- **4.2:** Build fiscal support for FFI through friend's network, new donors, and local giving events
- **4.3:** Assist businesses, schools and organizations with creative ways of investing in the health of students and employees.
- **4.4**: Collaborate with pre-existing programs and funding streams to include the regional food system.

Appendix A - Strategic Planning Participants

Mary Abbas - Kitchen Table Ministries
Merrill Angell - County Line Locker
Kimberlea Baker - D&K Family Farm
Drew Baker - D&K Family Farm
Maren Beard - Luther College, Luna Valley Farm, ANB Board, Oneota Co-op Board

Andrew Blair - Food Corps Member, NEIA Food and Fitness Initiative
Anne Bohl - Low Oaks Farm
Mike Bollinger - River Root Farm
Hannah Breckbill - Humble Hands Harvest
Rachel Brummel - Luther College, Highlandville Honey Farm
David Cavagnaro - Pepperfield Project
Flannery Cerbin-Bohach - Northeast Iowa Community College, Oneota Co-op Board
Barb Dale - Community Member
Josh Dansdill - Northeast Iowa RC&D
Chad Elliott - Decorah School District
Glen Elsbernd - G It's Fresh
Kristin Evanrud - Oneota Community Food Co-op
Beverly Fredrick - Spectrum Network
Brandon Friedlein - Community Savings Bank
Nate Furler - Oneota Community Food Co-op
Seth Gengler - SnoPac Foods
Elaine Govern - Community Member
Larry Grimstad - Decorah Bank and Trust, Community Member
Kyle Holthaus - Kymar Acres
Rachelle Howe - Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission
Sheri Huber-Otting - Northeast Iowa Food Bank
Jon Jensen - Luther College Center for Sustainable Communities
Mark Jensen - CUSB Bank
Haleisa Johnson - NEIA Food and Fitness Initiative, Facilitator
Peter Kerns - Turkey River Farm
Kayla Koether - ISU Extension and Outreach
Barb Kraus - Canoe Creek Produce
Carolyn Lambright - Cedar Ridge Farm
Neal Lambright - Cedar Ridge Farm
David Lester - Oneota Community Food Co-op
Ann Mansfield - NEIA Food and Fitness Initiative, Facilitator
Cheryl Martins - Northeast Iowa Community Action Corp Child and Adult Care Food Program
Steve McCargar - Winneshiek County Farmer's Market
Liz Murphy - WW Homestead Dairy
Diane Narum - Luther College Dining Services
Emily Neal - Luther College Center for Sustainable Communities
Eric Nordschow - Windridge Implements
Caite Palmer - Prairie's Edge Farm
Jodi Peake - J&J Farm
Jeremy Peake - J&J Farm
Betsy Pierce - Oneota Community Food Co-op, ANB Board
Barbara Prather - Northeast Iowa Food Bank
Katie Prochaska - River Root Farm
John Rodecap - Community Member
Pat Ryan - Quillins, Decorah
John Schroeher - Decorank Bank and Trust
Bill Thom - Community Member
Caleb Timp - Luther College Dining Services
Wayne Tudor - Luther College Dining Services
Kraig Tweed - ISU Extension and Outreach

Jennifer Votsmier - Veterans Memorial Hospital
Tom Weighner - WW Homestead Dairy
Teresa Wiemerslage - ISU Extension and Outreach
Patti Wild - Veterans Memorial Hospital
Georgia Windhorst - Iowa Food Hub
Dave Wise - Foresight Dairy
Halley Wise - Community Member
Kathy Zurcher - Consultant / Facilitator