

Food Hub – possibility in creating new markets for small-acreage farmers

The Situation

Many successful programs in nutrition assistance throughout the nation, state and local governments have been dedicated to eliminating hunger in their communities. Despite these efforts, hunger and food insecurity still exists. Idaho's food insecurity rate is 17%, the 20th highest ranked in the nation. In Gem County, the food insecurity rate is 18.1%, with nearly 1 in 5 people insecure about where their next meal is coming from. While Gem County community leaders understood that emergency food is not a sustainable solution to hunger, they were ready to move from hunger relief to food security.

Our Response

In 2011, community leaders partnering with University of Idaho Extension within Gem County began working with The Idaho Hunger Free Communities Initiative to develop a community plan and assessment tool. The core group began identifying resources for next steps, seeking grant funding, and learning to coordinate a focused approach to improving food security. The local core group met first to initiate the planning and assess community strengths and challenges, and to engage community members through a FEAST (Food, Education, Agriculture Solutions Together) planning meeting. After completing the FEAST activity the community formed breakout sub-committees. These focus groups included; (1) Mobility-Transportation: Accessing Fresh, Affordable Food, (2) Resources + Solutions: Making the Connections, and (3) Growing Jobs in the Local Food System, (Food Hub). Each group began moving forward to reach common community goals.



Local producers brainstorm about developing a Food Hub in Gem County.

Program Outcomes

University of Idaho Extension – Gem County has been involved in a leadership role for the Food Hub committee throughout the planning process. The committee began working on a feasibility study to determine if a Gem Community Food Hub would be viable in the valley. To increase awareness of this project, the committee hosted a Food Hub Social and invited local producers and partners. Input gained from the social gave the committee an idea on what the community viewed as a Food Hub, what a local food system should look like and determined other partners who should be at the table. During this process the Food Hub group found it necessary to survey our local small-acreage and large producers to determine the interest in producing and increasing a variety of crops, and the services that would be most beneficial to their farm.



Rikki Ruiz coordinating the Food Hub Brainstorming activity.

The Food Hub committee sent 138 surveys by mail and 57 surveys using the online survey monkey. Our response rate was 32%. The group found that the majority of interest in the Food Hub involved small acreage farmers with 5 to 9 acres. The crops most involved in these farms are vegetable production, berries, fruit and chicken production. When asked on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being not-interested, 5 being very-interested) how the farmers feel about utilizing a resource in our community that would provide assistance to Farms/Food Production, 47% of respondents indicated that they were "very interested." Participants were asked how likely they would be to increase food production if given the opportunity to sell through a food hub. Of those indicating "very interested," 56% of small acreage owners stated they would increase production in vegetables and crops if marketing through a food hub was available. These results indicated that a food hub could create a new market avenue for small-acreage producers, possibly creating new business enterprises within the community. The Food Hub committee's overall goal is to increase food crop production, while also creating more jobs to boost the economic growth. Results from the food hub survey have shown that increased production and job growth could come from investing in a food hub.

Since conducting the survey, we have received grant funding through the USDA to develop a more extensive Feasibility study and begin planning a Food Hub building and structure.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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