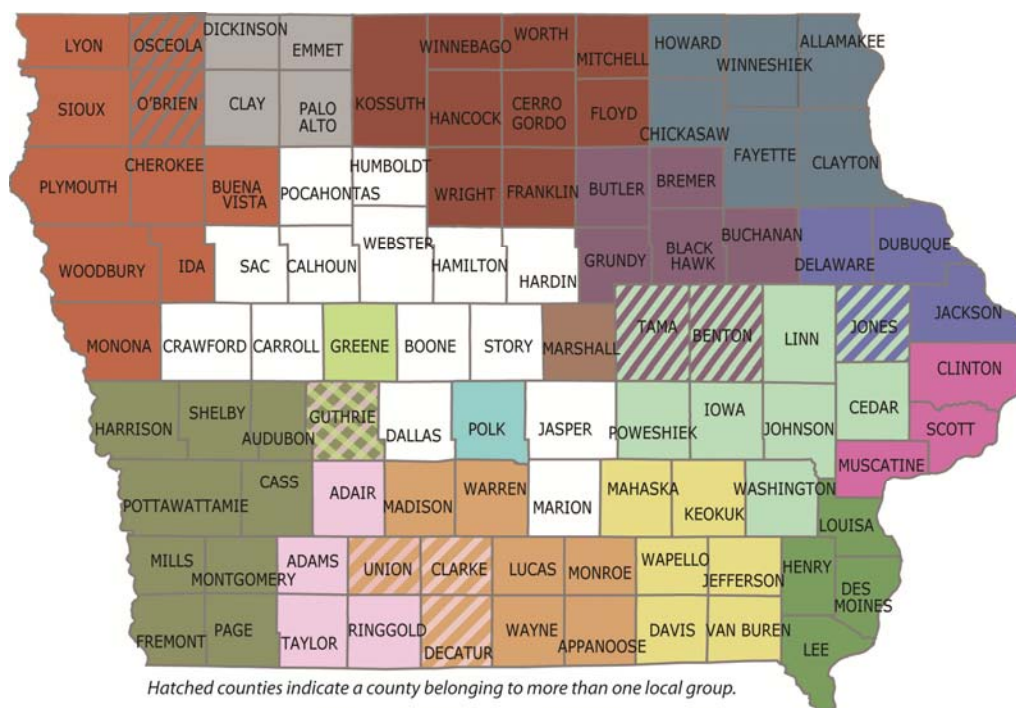


The Current State of Regional Food System Work in Iowa

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Introduction

The Regional Food System Working Group (RFSWG) began in 2003 as a community of practice in the Value Chain Partnerships project led by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. In 2011, RFSWG and other VCP working groups began to transition leadership away from the Leopold Center; RFSWG members currently are working to determine the best structure for the group going forward.

In July and August 2011, leaders of 15 local food groups participating in the RFSWG were interviewed (in-person, by phone, and by email) about their current projects, challenges, strategies for success, and other topics. Names of the RFSWG groups and the interviewees are listed at the end of this report, followed by the interview guide.

The interviews were transcribed and coded with a set of 19 themes, based on interview questions and initial impressions formed during transcription. The responses were then aggregated and synthesized by theme. The resulting report should serve as an update for the Leopold Center and RFSWG group members on the current activities and status of RFSWG groups. The responses from RFSWG leaders validate the importance of continuing this local food network, and should provide guidance for the development of RFSWG's structure and programming. The following sections detail the responses from group leaders on each topic:

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|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| I. Current Projects | VIII. Challenges |
| II. Projects on the Horizon | IX. Policy: Help or Hindrance |
| III. In Five Years | X. Data Collection: Metrics and Methods |
| IV. Regional Food System Vision | XI. Keys to Success |
| V. Messaging and Public Presentation | XII. Strategies |
| VI. Structure | XIII. Advice for Other Groups |
| VII. Successes | XIV. Support and Benefits of RFSWG |

The final section presents conclusions and recommendations for future action and projects by the Leopold Center and by RFSWG.

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Cover image:
See pg. 16 for names of each local food system group participating in RFSWG.

Layout by Melissa Lamberton, Leopold Center Graduate Research Assistant



I. Current Projects

RFSWG groups are working on a variety of projects to develop the food system(s) in their regions. Many groups coordinate the Buy Fresh Buy Local chapter in their county or region, bring local food and curriculum into local community school districts, and work to increase awareness and knowledge of local foods in their communities. Some RFSWG leaders are increasing their capacity to do this work by developing leaders and food policy councils in each county



they serve. Many leaders emphasized that the demand for local foods far outstripped the current supply. To that end, groups are working to develop the capacity of growers by coordinating grower's cooperatives and groups, supporting farmer's markets, educating growers about marketing and season extension opportunities, and starting a farm incubator project to train new growers. Leaders of some recently formed groups are focusing on establishing relationships and setting goals, so that they can determine what specific projects will best serve their regions. One vague but crucial aspect of RFSWG work is "changing attitudes about agriculture;" one leader says she has encouraged the students and residents she works with to "call farmers 'food producers'" and to "talk about them like they're the most important people in the whole universe."

II. Projects on the Horizon

In addition to current projects, RFSWG groups have many projects and activities on the horizon. They are organizing events such as a culinary tour, a fruit and vegetable symposium, and a "Hope for the Hungry" workshop.¹ Many are continuing to develop the capacity of growers in their region with activities such as creating a land database, organizing a food cooperative, and developing workshops for producers. They also will work to increase local food sales by using marketing messages about the benefits of local food, studying the feasibility of urban agriculture, connecting grocery stores to producers, developing Buy Fresh Buy Local directories, and creating an online food hub. Some RFSWG groups are looking ahead to projects that involve building or renovating facilities, such as a shared-use kitchen and a regional food hub for aggregation and distribution of products.

Most of the group leaders also mentioned developing their organization and its capacity by creating a more formal structure, hiring paid staff, developing a website, and spreading the word about their group and what it can offer to residents and growers interested in local food. They also plan to bring other organizations such as economic development groups into the local food arena, and lead new partners through strategic planning processes in order to work together as a region.

¹ <http://urbanfooddsm.org/events/hope-for-the-hungry-feeding-1>

III. Projects in Five Years

In five years, many groups expect to be working on projects similar to those already taking place across the state, especially those related to training, organizing, and developing the capacity of local growers. One group specifically wants to focus on ensuring that farmers can create viable family businesses. A few groups said their goal was to move into the “bricks-and-mortar” phase—that is, to develop, build and/or renovate some type of food hub or kitchen facility in that time period.

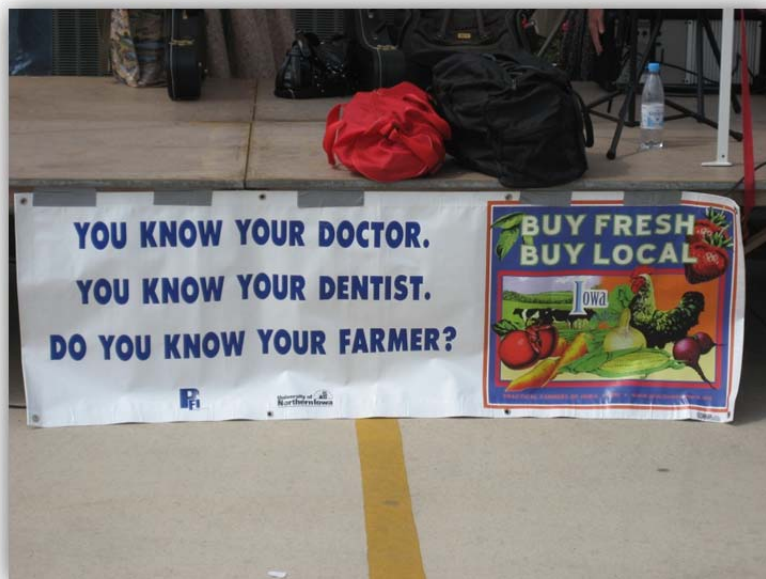
Six groups mentioned organizational goals for this timeframe; they hoped to

- Develop county-level food teams or councils to the point that the regional coordinator’s role is no longer necessary, or shifts in focus to true coordination of activities across the region;
- Create a better structure and branding for the RFSWG group “so that people understand what it is [and have] something to buy into;”
- Become a hub of information and resources about local and regional food;
- Identify and train food systems representatives for each county in Iowa;
- Change overall attitudes about agriculture and farming in the RFSWG community; and
- Develop of a region-wide food system plan in collaboration with neighboring communities and organizations.

IV. Regional Food System Vision

When asked about their vision for a regional food system in their region, RFSWG leaders had several types of responses. Some mentioned specific projects that they hoped to accomplish: creating a system similar to ACEnet², developing an education center/greenhouse facility, developing a farmer training/incubator program, and replacing the food system infrastructure in their regions. Others saw the future in broader terms and hoped that their groups still would be active—and be recognized as significant players—in food system work and regional development, and that they would be flexible

enough to tackle whatever projects and needs came up in their communities. One leader hoped that the projects and plans her group is working to establish now would become the norm in the group’s communities.



V. Marketing, Messaging and Public Presentation

Most groups have some type of presence on the World Wide Web—for some it is only a static webpage, but others have more developed websites, pages

² <http://www.acenetworks.org/>

on social networks such as Facebook, and email lists. Several are in the process of transitioning from one website to the next, and one group leader pointed out that they had to do the work of determining their group structure, mission, and focus before they could develop things such as a logo, tagline, and the content and materials for a website. One leader said she tries “to send short emails [...] where there’s just two or three bullets only [that] hit the highlights [and] include links.” She also noted, “in kind of an old fashioned way, we rely a lot on phone calls.” Another pointed out that, while the school markets were not big enough to be profitable for their farmers, incorporating local foods into school meals gives them an unexpected marketing opportunity, as they are “grooming all these children and youth to appreciate local food.”

VI. Organizational Structure

The most common group structure was quite informal, with regular meetings open to anyone who wanted to attend. Some groups hosted fewer meetings but used conference calls to stay in touch in between face-to-face meetings. Groups made up primarily of growers met frequently in the winter, and less often, if at all, during the growing season. Some groups have one or more staff members who are paid to coordinate RFSWG activities, but the majority of the members participate as volunteers. (Though they are not being paid to attend meetings and participate in projects, group members such as restaurant owners, growers, food service directors, and extension educators may consider their time spent on RFSWG work an extension of their full-time job.) Most groups refer to the meeting attendees as their advisory group or steering committee; that group sets the direction and works on group projects.

A few groups have established an executive committee, made up of a few people selected from the larger steering committee, to create a decision-making structure. One leader said that this allowed her to “broaden the ownership” of the group, and that it was beneficial to have a smaller group of people to help “think through the priorities” of the larger group’s work. Some RFSWG groups are affiliated with other organizations—Extension offices, Resource Conservation & Development districts (RC&Ds), and Regional Economic Development groups. All of the group leaders that discussed their strategic planning processes mentioned that they engaged a large, diverse audience for those meetings, and that after the plan was created, they had a smaller number of active participants.



VII. Successes

When asked to name their successes, RFSWG group leaders responded with a long and detailed list of specific events and projects, relationships, and observations about the local food movement as a whole.

Many successes had to do with relationships within the group:

- Establishing awareness across groups of local food work,
- Creating a culture of cooperation,
- Recognizing shared needs and the need to cooperate, and
- Forming a grower's cooperative.

Other successes involved the larger community:

- Having a good relationship with institutional buyers such as Hy-Vee,
- Having established relationships between growers and buyers that now exist independent of the RFSWG group,
- Making local food a part of school meals and curriculum,
- Having an email list of many individuals who are interested in and support the group, and
- Bringing together community foundations to explore their role in supporting this work.

One group leader said the group's success could be seen in their transition from being a potentially divisive force in the community to having local food work become a unifying force and a source of pride to people outside the group.

The majority of the groups noted specific events that were successful: workshops, dinners, expos for growers and buyers, local food booths at county fairs, a farm tour for county board members. They also noted successful projects: local food meals in schools, creating a regional plan, establishing a



county food policy council, coordinating Buy Fresh Buy Local chapters, and creating a zoning exemption for high tunnels on small farms). Others referred to funding and grants received, as well as generating news media coverage and creating a new website. One group leader pointed out that getting a grant had allowed them to take a more organized approach to food system work; another mentioned the group's longevity itself as a point of success. Two group leaders saw the growth of general awareness of local food and activity in the local food system as signs of the success of RFSWG work.

VIII. Challenges

RFSWG leaders mentioned many specific challenges unique to their groups, but they fall into common categories.

Lack of funding and time

The top challenges faced by RFSWG groups are not surprising: a lack of funding (for projects and staff) and a lack of time (paid and volunteer). Several leaders mentioned the general busy-ness of everyone involved in their group, and one specifically referenced the lack of time for projects during the growing season. One pointed out that regional food work really requires more

personnel than just one person, given all the different personalities and relationships that are involved when working with many partners.

Sharing responsibility

Groups also are working on issues related to sharing responsibility and getting commitments. Leaders mentioned the need to

- shift to a shared leadership model, so that ownership and responsibility did not rest with just one person; to
- manage over-enthusiasm at the beginning of a project, so that members did not try to do too much or suffer burnout; and
- clarify procedures within a grower's cooperative and with organizational partners, in order to make lines of responsibility and accountability clear.

In the context of Farm to School, leaders pointed out that there must be a local food champion within each school in order for the partnership to work, and that many food service directors and food service workers already are overworked.

Meeting growers' needs

Many RFSWG leaders mentioned challenges related to the growers in their regions. In most areas (and across the country) the farmer population is aging, so they will need to find and train many new farmers to meet the demand for local and regional foods. In other areas, growers have trouble connecting to buyers even after increasing their supply, so they need help with marketing strategies and building relationships with buyers. In some regions, RFSWG leaders must convince farmers that new farmer's markets and new growers are not in direct competition with one another. Other grower-related challenges faced by some local food groups are finding visionary producers who want to increase production and expand their operations, and developing momentum and organization after recent years of low production.

Group identity and focus

From an organizational perspective, RFSWG leaders struggled with determining a group focus and goals when funding was project-based and uncertain, building a strong RFSWG group when members are all part of other organizations, and forming a group identity that is different from other organizations in the region without becoming territorial or competitive. One group faces the challenge of coordinating and communicating region-wide development with many partner groups without imposing too much control over the process. Another group has struggled to balance competing interests within the advisory group, and with the concept of a food hub being attached to a particular building within its region. As one group plans to develop a facility, the leadership is faced with the challenge of deciding its location—and most individuals and communities in the region think their “backyard” would be the best place for it. Two group leaders also identified the ongoing changes in the organizations they are affiliated with (e.g., the Value Chain Partnerships program and RC&Ds) as a challenge for their local RFSWG groups.



Challenges in rural areas

Groups in predominantly rural areas faced specific challenges: the large distances between growers and residents means that it is difficult to bring people together for meetings, and that local food producers often do not have neighbors running the same type of operation. Access to broadband technology is limited in these areas, so web-based meeting tools are not always an option. One leader pointed out that this means that developing and maintaining technology, and training users to be comfortable with it, are important aspects of RFSWG work. Another leader said, “local food for right now is going to be local, it’s not going to be regional” because of the challenges posed by the geography and sparse population of her region. She used Farm to School as an example of how the eastern portion of the state has more food system activity than the more rural western half, arguing that “there is a difference between how things happen and what can happen in those low-populated, low-resource counties in terms of local foods and what can happen in the larger, populated areas that are close to urban centers.” Leaders also mentioned pieces of rural Iowa culture that make it difficult to develop a food system: residents and growers are private and not prone to joining groups; often they equate having a garden with participating in the local food movement, even though they do not change their buying habits at the grocery store. It also can be challenging to identify local food system activity in these areas, since many transactions happen through a “black market,” unofficial system. RFSWG members must work to “shine a light on the local food system as it exists without attracting undue attention that makes producers uncomfortable.”



Geography & Other

Geography was not just a challenge in rural areas: many leaders mentioned that their regions covering six or seven counties were too large for one coordinator or RFSWG group to manage, and argued there should be leadership from within each foodshed or community. Other challenges that groups need to address include getting accurate sales data from farmers, providing consumer education for buyers who want grocery store prices and appearance at farmer’s markets, and needing to work simultaneously on making the case for buying local food and determining the feasibility of production and processing.

IX. Policy: Help or Hindrance

When asked about their interactions with policies that either supported their work or were obstacles to it, most RFSWG leaders said that they had not dealt with any specific policies yet, but expected to as they developed more complex projects, especially ones involving processing and infrastructure. Two group leaders said they had received support from local authorities, and others mentioned Farm to School funding (from the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship) as

evidence of state support for their efforts. At a federal level, leaders thought their groups had benefited from Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food; the Rural Development Agency's support of local food; being able to use EBT at Farmer's Markets; and the increase in general awareness of the local food movement that followed Farm to School and Child Nutrition policies.

Policy problems encountered at the local level have had to do with zoning for structures on small farms, and at the state level two group leaders thought the illegality of raw milk sales kept their producers from being as successful as they could. To sell meat and poultry across state lines, the slaughter and processing facility must be federally inspected. There are not many USDA-approved facilities in Iowa, and this is a problem for the groups whose regional food system should include sales in other states. Federal policy also has proved frustrating to some group leaders in terms of the time it takes for the USDA and other agencies to provide specific instructions and guidelines on how to implement policy changes such as the geographic preference option in the 2008 Farm Bill. Other specific policies that had created challenges for RFSWG work were the differing taxes on food-grade soybean as opposed to those grown for processing, and additional paperwork and food safety oversight given to (already over-worked) food service directors when dealing with local food versus food brought in from an industrial supplier.

Group leaders had varying positions on the relationship of their work to policy. One felt that there was general support for local food work but groups would need to be wary of stepping on toes or appearing too radical. Another leader felt it was not the RFSWG role to advocate for one policy or another but to provide information. And a third person believed that all current food policy is designed for a global, industrial system, and we have yet to see policy written and passed that truly supports local and regional food systems and the (re)development of this infrastructure. One group's experience proved that the interpretation of federal policy and the way it is implemented at the state level is just as important as the policy itself.

X. Data Collection: Methods and Metrics

The extent and content of data collection vary wildly from group to group. The most-tracked metrics had to do with sales of local food. Groups collected this information by asking growers and institutions to report their sales data, and by tracking the gross sales of a grower's cooperative.



However, some group leaders were not confident in the accuracy of the sales numbers reported by farmers, and some groups have not yet begun to collect this information. Groups have used farmer's markets to gather data about local supply (number of vendors) and consumer knowledge and awareness of local food through customer surveys about food knowledge and food choices. Many groups are monitoring informal indicators of interest, such as the number of attendees at meetings and presentations about local food, and the number of participants in the Buy Fresh Buy Local directories. Some groups also

are developing a database of the growers in their region and what products they sell. Based on feedback from local growers, one group has expanded its grower survey to include sales of non-food value-added products.

Data collection methods were as varied as the indicators tracked; they included paper surveys, word documents sent out via email, online surveys, phone calls, and in-person conversations. In addition to using online survey tools and a spreadsheet to manage quantitative data, one group tracks anecdotal evidence throughout the year, to gather qualitative data and be able to spot emerging trends.

XI. Keys to Success

RFSWG group leaders identified many factors that contributed to their successes. In terms of professional background and experience, some leaders benefited from having experience with farmers, federal systems, and the grocery and restaurant industries. Specific skills that were useful in regional food system work were community organizing, nonprofit management, public relations and media, facilitation, grant-writing, salesmanship and enthusiasm. Identifying key partners, working with open-minded partners, and being connected to established institutions were cited as key factors in the success of many groups. In addition to connections with local institutions, RFSWG group leaders said their relationships and personal connections within the community, and their connections with other RFSWG members helped them succeed.

XII. Strategies

RFSWG groups employ many overlapping strategies to develop their food systems and successfully navigate challenges.

Broad coalition

Most group leaders said that they purposefully developed a broad coalition of partners and supporters, and a couple made it a point to reach out to individuals and organizations that were not inherent allies, in order to facilitate communication about the real goals and mission of the RFSWG group. One leader received negative feedback at first, from members who assumed that someone she had invited to their meeting was opposed to the topic at hand; she pushed back, saying, “No, how would I know that? I know they’re interested in this topic, and so we need to have them [at the meeting] so we can know why they’re opposed and [then] we can deal with whatever that means.” Another leader also found it crucial to respond to calls or inquiries from outside groups to answer questions or clear up misunderstandings about what the RFSWG group was doing.



For those groups near state borders, having a partner across state lines to help navigate policies and other challenges is key. One group's leader said that, having established partnerships and relationships, they were focusing on delegating the implementation of new projects and ideas back out to the broader group of partners. Another group said that they found working with schools and sharing information about school food was a powerful tool for drawing in the broader community, and reaching individuals who had not previously been interested in the local food movement.



Documentation

For successful data collection, group leaders said they started documenting information from the start, and they began with a small number of growers and institutions with whom they already had relationships. In addition to open-ended survey questions, in-person conversations were effective for collecting qualitative and anecdotal data. They found that being persistent but polite and friendly with institutions allowed them to see the importance of tracking local food sales, and helped the institutions develop their own internal tracking systems.

Meeting location and membership

As leaders were working to develop their RFSWG groups, they made it a point to travel to different communities, instead of always meeting in one location; this continues as the standard practice for many of the established RFSWG groups. They also tried to make sure that representatives from other communities within the region joined them for the trip, so that they could talk to one another instead of communicating only through a RFSWG coordinator.

This direct, inter-community sharing means that,

instead of the coordinator saying “‘Oh yes, the people in [another town] have the exact same issue and they’ve identified the exact same goal,’ [all the residents] get to hear that for themselves.”

Networking

Some RFSWG groups have found it beneficial to collaborate on similar projects and events, and most said they made it a point to consult with others who had already completed certain types of projects. One of the group leaders in a rural area said her group made a point to bring in speakers with rural experience and examples to share.

Planning

The groups that had gone through strategic planning said the process and the plan were helpful in identifying specific needs, moving the group forward, and grounding and guiding them in the future. One leader said, “the plan helps a lot [because] otherwise you can get pulled in so many directions. It also helps when you’re working through your new process and you’re writing a new grant, you can go right back to this plan. [...It] speeds up your grant-writing process and helps you decide what you should apply for.” Another said, “whenever I get lost at work I refer back to that mission and vision statement, [and ask] where am I not [focusing], what am I missing, [and] what have I not paid attention to for a month that I need to revisit?”

One group leader cautioned that, while you need to have a plan and follow it, you also have to “listen and learn where the barriers are,” and be flexible enough to meet unexpected challenges as they arise.

Other

Other strategies implemented by RFSWG groups include leveraging existing support for more funding, and structuring relationships to minimize vulnerability—in the case of institutional food sales, making sure that one grower is not dependent on one institution and vice versa. One group also recommended limiting the number of strategies or projects so they could focus on one area, which often led to unexpected progress in other areas.

XIII. Advice for Other Groups

RFSWG group leaders had plenty of advice for individuals or groups just starting a food project, much of it based on their own experiences and lessons learned. They encouraged creating a plan from the very beginning, so that the group could make decisions about which projects to take on in the future by referring back to the initial mission and vision. New groups should engage with a broad group of potential partners during the planning process, and share the final plan with the entire community. Engaging partners (individuals and organizations) should involve getting the word out in as many places and forms as possible (connections come from unexpected places), and making an upfront investment in the process. The investment could be a basic one, like providing food at meetings, or a larger project, such as providing mini-grants to producers and groups just getting started. Having regular meetings after the initial process was suggested as a way to stay on track and manage accountability among partners. Some of the advice focused on finding a balance: one leader urged groups to be flexible in accommodating partners, so that the workload would be shared, but to set certain standards and be uncompromising on them, such as the quality of product delivered by a grower’s cooperative.

One group leader advised thinking about the group as a business, and developing a business plan with diverse funding streams to ensure long-term sustainability. She noted that “it doesn’t benefit anybody, and can even do more harm than good, to have a flash-in-the-pan local food systems group that’s [only] around for a year or two,” so it is crucial to develop sustainable relationships and funding sources. On the topic of funding, another pointed out that groups should never be afraid to ask for money and support. Leaders emphasized making connections around the state (through RFSWG and other umbrella organizations), and learning from what other groups have done and what models they have used. However, it is important for new groups not to be intimidated by more established ones, or to assume that there is only one way to start creating a food system. One leader summarized it well, saying that new groups need to set their own goals and then make sure they’re meeting them. Several leaders pointed out that it is essential for RFSWG groups to



listen to producers and provide programming that addresses their needs. One noted that that process “sometimes takes a bit of work”—producers in her region “didn’t say ‘We need a workshop on high tunnels.’ They were asking, ‘How can we expand our growing season? What are the things we can do?’” So the RFSWG group had to figure out what would meet that need.

For groups covering a large geographic area, one leader suggested developing the individual focus and leadership of each county, and then working to coordinate the resulting activities. She recommended that other RFSWG leaders going through this process “understand that each community is going to have [its] own focus and that it would be well worth their time, especially in the beginning,” to address the different needs of each community. Another leader strongly recommended hiring a full-time coordinator for a region, noting the positive feedback the group had received about the increased amount and quality of their work after the group had done so.



XIV. Support and the Benefits of RFSWG

In addition to the ever-present needs of more funds and more time, group leaders named several other areas in which their RFSWG groups needed support. In most cases, they thought this support could be provided through their connections with the Leopold Center, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, other research-based institutions, and through RFSWG itself. One group leader was interested in working together to leverage funds and

resources, especially to cover staff salaries and reduce the cycle of planning and working from grant to grant. Others wanted to continue the learning community that RFSWG had developed because it presented opportunities to provide updates, make connections, offer training, share resources, and counteract the isolation that some group leaders have felt. One group leader noted that creating and distributing templates and models based on successful RFSWG projects would be especially helpful for newer groups. Sharing resources and documents (news media coverage, story ideas, local food curriculum for schools, etc.) among the group in an informal way, in between formal meetings, also was mentioned as a way for RFSWG members to support one other.

As an umbrella organization, RFSWG has the capacity to multiply the efforts of individual groups, and group leaders want help determining the indicators and data collection methods that will prove the statewide impact of their work. RFSWG group leaders also want support in the form of state-level policy change, and technology that facilitates communication within and among groups, especially those covering a large geographical area. The Leopold Center and other research-focused institutions could help RFSWG groups by providing research results about various aspects of the food system (such as the transportation costs of non-local fruit and vegetable purchases), and by engaging RFSWG groups in the research development process, so that the end products are meaningful and beneficial to both researchers and the RFSWG groups. As RFSWG transitions to a new structure, one group leader hoped that the Leopold Center would continue to engage with the steering committee and provide resources and support throughout the process.

Throughout the interviews, RFSWG group leaders offered evidence of the progress made through their work, and the benefits of participation in RFSWG.

- One leader noted that “in the beginning [local food] was sort of a tough sell to my board,” but that on the morning of the interview, she had heard a Talk of Iowa program about local foods and was amazed at “how mainstream [it had become] in just a few short years.”
- At informal meetings as a RFSWG group, “we refer to rest of Iowa all the time because it actually makes us more legitimate, because people are not familiar with the food system stuff in western Iowa. [...We can say] look there are other people all across the state [and the country] doing this!”
- “I think in Iowa we’re especially lucky to have [...] state-level organizations that help us interact with the state legislature. [Those efforts combined with the] recent appropriations for the state level local food coordinator will hopefully help build a system where policy issues that are at the state level can be fed upstream. [It] also gives us more authority, and scope, and magnitude to deal with federal policy issues, if we can document what impact those federal policies have in multiple jurisdictions across an entire state—that gives Iowa a significant foundation and platform to take to the federal level, to talk about federal policy.”
- “It can be pretty isolating and it’s really nice to have that statewide connection and [access to] people who’ve been in that position [and know] know what to get out of it, best practices, and that kind of thing. I would definitely say that’s really special.”
- “Doing this work with an understanding that you’re kind of connected to this bigger picture, bigger thinking, and bigger support [is different] than if I was just out here saying, ‘Oh we want grow our regional food group and we’re going to work within our region.’ I don’t think it’s as grounded that way.”
- We should “formalize [what has] been going on informally [and] the sharing of resources” because “the open communication has been really invaluable [and] incredibly helpful as new groups come on board.”
- “I hope that that pattern of RFSWG serving as a learning community continues. [...] What I’m really hungry for right now is to learn from others about how to formulate the strategy and approach” to building up a regional food system.



Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, Iowa is full of regional and local food system activity: events and projects are happening in many communities around the state. The above analysis clearly shows a need for continuing the RFSWG community, and structuring RFSWG in a way that facilitates sharing and learning from other members and groups. The leaders of RFSWG groups have gained much knowledge from their experiences, which needs to be shared for the benefit of other groups and future food systems activists

in Iowa and beyond. The following are recommendations for the Leopold Center, RFSWG group leaders, and RFSWG as a whole:

1. Continue the learning community of RFSWG. Though some organizational and administrative aspects will undoubtedly change as the group develops its own leadership structure, RFSWG should still prioritize sharing resources and providing opportunities for members to learn from each other.
2. Create a rural groups task force, sub-group, or communication pathway. Groups in rural areas seem to face different challenges than groups that include urban centers, and would benefit from collaborating, sharing ideas, and collective problem-solving.
3. Create a RFSWG group email list (possibly a Google group) that can be used to distribute articles, notes about successes, and questions for one another. One positive thing about Google groups is that you can search archives for past posts on various topics.
4. Create and implement overall data collection processes and standards. Currently, each group collects some data (with varying levels of accuracy and confidence), but this activity seems to be targeted at individual situations or needs. The role of RFSWG as an umbrella organization should be to help individual groups work toward statewide goals, or within a statewide frame. This means that RFSWG should develop a common set of indicators and methods for data collection, to be used regularly by each group. They should also train group leaders and members on data collection methods.
5. Link RFSWG leaders with researchers before projects begin. Group leaders should be involved in research design from the beginning, so that the projects and results are mutually beneficial.

Appendix I. RFSWG Interview List

In July and August of 2011, interviews were conducted with the following individuals, based on the active membership of RFSWG at the time. Because of scheduling restrictions, no interview was conducted with a representative from Greene County Local Foods (Greene and Guthrie counties). The map on the cover of this report indicates which counties are included in one or more RFSWG groups.

RFSWG GROUPS	COUNTIES	INTERVIEWEES
Dubuque Eats Well	Delaware, Dubuque, Jackson and Jones	Jenni Ostwinkle
Great River Food Alliance of Southeast Iowa, Inc.	Des Moines, Henry, Lee and Louisa	Yvonne Knapp
Harvest from the Heart	Marshall	Jan Swinton
Healthy Harvest of North Iowa	Cerro Gordo, Floyd, Franklin, Hancock, Kossuth, Mitchell, Winnebago, Worth and Wright	Jan Libbey
Healthy Urban Food and Farming Group	Polk	Linda Gobberdiel
Hometown Harvest of Southeast Iowa	Davis, Jefferson, Keokuk, Mahaska, Van Buren and Wapello	Detra Dettmann; Elisabet Humble
Iowa Corridor Food and Agriculture Coalition	Benton, Cedar, Iowa, Johnson, Jones, Linn, Poweshiek, Tama and Washington	Jason Grimm
Iowa Great Lakes Local Foods Network	Clay, Dickinson, Emmet, O'Brien, Osceola and Palo Alto	Dennis McDonald
Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition	Allamakee, Chickasaw, Clayton, Fayette, Howard and Winneshiek counties	Brenda Ranum and Teresa Wiemerslage
Northern Iowa Food and Farm Partnership	Benton, Black Hawk, Bremer, Buchanan, Butler, Grundy and Tama	Andrea Geary
Quad City Food Hub	Clinton, Muscatine and Scott	Sherry Staub
Regional Flavors of Northwest Iowa	Cherokee, Ida, Monona, Plymouth, Sioux and Woodbury	Laura Kuennen
South-Central Iowa Area Group	Appanoose, Clarke, Decatur, Lucas, Madison, Monroe, Union, Warren and Wayne	Sharon Wasteney
Southern Iowa Regional Food Systems	Adair, Adams, Clarke, Decatur, Guthrie, Ringgold, Taylor and Union	Joe Sellers
Southwest Iowa Food and Farm Initiative	Audubon, Cass, Fremont, Guthrie, Harrison, Mills, Montgomery, Page, Pottawattamie and Shelby	Bahia Nightengale

Appendix II. Interview Guide

The interviews with RFSWG group leaders were conducted with a semi-structured format. The following questions were used as a basis for starting the conversation, and moving from topic to topic.

RFSWG Interview Guide, Summer 2011

1. What's the history of your group? Can you describe how it started, and what your mission and major projects are?
2. What is your group's structure? (*who attends meetings, how often, who's in charge, paid vs. volunteer participation, etc.*)
3. What are your group's successes to date?
4. What were the key factors in making those successes happen? (*who was involved, what process did you go through, etc.*)
5. I'd like you to share your thoughts about the future at a few different scales/points in time:
 - a. What are your next big projects?
 - b. Where do you see your group in 5 years?
 - c. What's your ideal vision for a regional food system in your region?
6. What challenges do you currently face?
7. Other than financial support, what are your group's main needs to meet those challenges and continue your work?
8. Momentum & messaging: how does your group present itself to the public? What publications, webpages, documents, etc. do you have?
9. Are there any policies (local, state, or federal) that have supported your work and made it easier, or ones that have been obstacles that required you to work around them?
10. What metrics and data have you used to measure the progress/success of your projects?
11. What advice do you have for individuals or a group just starting to do regional food system work?
12. How did you wind up doing this work/in this position? What skills or training were essential to starting and/or succeeding in this work?