

FoodHub in the News



The Agriculture Quarterly
Issue 376, Winter 2009/10
By Bruce Pokarney

FoodHub connects the spokes of Pacific Northwest agriculture

It's a little bit of the old-style public marketplace. It's perhaps a relative to the telephone directory. It also borrows from the more contemporary concept of Craigslist. Welcome to FoodHub, a collaborative online network of buyers and sellers of local agricultural foods that acts like a virtual wholesale market.

"FoodHub provides a unique platform across which all segments of Oregon agriculture, small and large, can participate in the same selling opportunity to the many valued customers of our state's food products," says the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Gary Roth, administrator of ODA's Agricultural Development and Marketing Division.

The simplicity of the FoodHub concept masks the behind-the-scenes hard work and resources it took before the brainchild became a reality. It's a work-in-progress. Operational since the fall, the official kickoff of FoodHub will take place on February 1. Meanwhile, individuals and companies with food to sell are signing up to be part of the evolving database, as are those individuals and companies that want to purchase local foods. Could it be the eHarmony of the food world?

"Matchmaking, when it comes to buying and selling food, is something we always strive to do," says ODA Director Katy Coba. "FoodHub is an exciting development that combines Internet technology with the growing interest in accessing locally grown food."

The aim is to come close at being all things to all people in the food world. FoodHub, ideally, will offer something to the small acreage farmer who sells once a week at a farmers' market as well as offer an opportunity to the large volume operator. It is designed to give a local chef a list of ingredient providers as well as provide a large school district or food processor with sources of Northwest-grown products.

So far, FoodHub is getting noticed by a diverse group of interests.

Food at your fingertips

Typing in food-hub.org on the Internet will take you to more than just a standard, informative Web site. This is where the online marketplace exists, making it easy and efficient for regional food buyers and sellers to find one another, connect, and ultimately do business.

"Imagine being the school food service director at Portland Public Schools, you serve 20,000 meals a day, and you want to localize your supply chain," says Deborah Kane, vice president of Ecotrust's Food & Farm program and key figure in the development of FoodHub. "With FoodHub, you can walk to your computer, type in the word 'potato' and get a list of all the regional potato producers

who might be able to meet your volume, price, and delivery needs. Furthermore, you can sort your returns to select only those with Good Agricultural Practices or \$1 million in liability insurance.”

Public schools, colleges, hospitals, and grocery stores are among those larger institutional purchasers who are looking to give preference to locally grown food, assuming all other factors are met—cost, quality, quantity, and delivery requirements. Meanwhile, Oregon farmers, ranchers, and fishermen often struggle to find markets for their products. If not a match made in heaven, FoodHub at least provides a great opportunity to bring these buyers and sellers together.

“FoodHub is designed to be a one-stop-shop for the chef who needs six dozen artichokes for a menu special, the baker looking for a local source for flour, or the large institutional buyer whose purchasing power could significantly stabilize a family farm,” says Kane.

In the past, Ecotrust published hard copy annual guides that listed local farms and buyers, but found that it was often obsolete the moment it was printed. Now, real time information is entered and maintained on the Web site.

For an annual membership fee of \$100, those who register with FoodHub complete an online profile that includes all the necessary details that may lead to a transaction. Currently, there are nearly 200 buyers and sellers enrolled and featured on the Web site. The goal is to have as many as a thousand by spring.

A big boost for the small producer

In the high desert of Eastern Oregon’s Harney County, Don McNab and his family raise all natural grassfed and grass finished beef. The operation—known as “Home on the Range Beef”—has been a regular at farmers’ markets in Bend and Boise. With FoodHub, the McNabs hope to expand their reach.

“We felt FoodHub would be a good place to spend advertising dollars in the Portland and surrounding areas for the type of product we sell,” says McNab. “My goal is to reach more contacts and be able to meet the needs of the larger markets.”

Being a small, rural, family-owned beef business, Home on the Range has found it difficult to make the wholesale connection with businesses. Past efforts have focused on reaching the consumer first hand. FoodHub may help change all that.

Grand Central Baking, operating neighborhood cafes in Portland and Seattle, is both buyer and seller. FoodHub provides the company two ways of benefiting. As a buyer, Grand Central can demonstrate its commitment to local foods by sourcing such items as tree fruits, berries, and eggs through the online marketplace. As a seller, they offer artisan bread at a variety of farmers’ markets and would like to expand to wholesale as well.

“For us, using FoodHub is a no-brainer,” says Piper Davis, cuisine director. “We need a resource to let us know what farmers have what products available at any given time of the year. FoodHub will hopefully increase the variety, quality, and efficiency in our local sourcing.”

Grand Central Baking is hoping to overcome previous limitations to finding stable partnerships between supplier and consumer.

“We are always looking for the right fit—producers who have consistent volumes, high quality, and can provide the customer service and support,” says Davis. “I definitely think FoodHub will help advance local foods and companies.”

Getting more of the larger, institutional buyers and sellers to participate is one of FoodHub’s major goals.

Another pathway for high volume buyers

The majority of FoodHub’s current membership consists of the smaller volume folks. But not exclusively. The question asked by some larger companies may be, what’s in it for me?

ODA’s Gary Roth answers the question with another question.

“Why wouldn't a large supplier want to be involved with FoodHub? When a company like Food Services of America (FSA) is a strong supporter of this program, that tells you that the objective of FoodHub is not just to sell small, individualized lots into specialized markets. The intent is to also make known large quantities of Oregon food products for volume purchases.”

In November, FSA made all of its Oregon restaurant and K-12 school customers an offer they hope can’t be refused. As an incentive to join FoodHub, FSA agreed to underwrite 20 percent of the cost of the annual membership. While saving \$20 may not seem like a windfall, FSA believes it may help FoodHub add to its list of buyers.

“FSA has always supported local farms and suppliers, and regularly stocks a great variety of seasonal offerings,” says Jim Reynolds, vice president of marketing. “Through FoodHub, our restaurant customers will be able to keep a direct tab on what is in season, and find information on their source so they can market them effectively on the menus. By providing a year-round supply of perishable products, FSA is best able to efficiently distribute local products in season, and out-of-area product when local becomes unavailable.”

FSA shares the same vision as the much smaller Grand Central Baking when it comes to seeing FoodHub successfully advancing local foods and companies.

“Most definitely,” says Reynolds. “As a Northwest company, Food Services of America is directly tied to the long term health of our region, both economic and ecological. It’s in all of our best interests to support a vibrant and healthy atmosphere for supplying the needs of our dining community.”

Now in its fourth decade of operation, Truitt Brothers, Inc. of Salem has earned a reputation for being a leading processor of shelf stable foods, from soups and entrees to fruits and vegetables. With products distributed through FSA and Sysco, a wide range of customers count on the food processed by Truitt. One of the sizeable sellers in the FoodHub database, the company didn’t need much convincing to join.

“The simple and appealing concept of linking buyers and sellers via this platform is so patently obvious, it makes one wonder why it hasn’t been done before?” says Peter Truitt. “I truly believe our participation and leadership in this compelling concept will absolutely result in more business opportunities.”

As you look at the list of FoodHub subscribers to date, there are many quaint and relatively unknown company names. However, there are plenty of recognizable ones as well. The roster of buyers includes Portland, Beaverton, Salem, and Bend-LaPine school districts, Oregon Health Science University, Providence Medical Center, Burgerville, Safeway, and New Seasons. On the seller side, there are Bob's Red Mill, Columbia Farms, Country Natural Beef, and Rogue Creamery.

All on the same (Web) page

The list of FoodHub supporting cast members is as impressive as the members themselves. With momentum and support from a variety of partners, including the Oregon Department of Agriculture, the online marketplace is now up and running.

“It had been a goal of ours to create a Web based tool that would allow for buyer and seller to become aware of one another and exchange information,” says ODA's Roth. “In the early stages of pursuing this goal, we learned that Ecotrust was pursuing a similar objective. After lengthy discussions, we determined that partnering with them on the FoodHub tool was cost effective, efficient, and avoided duplication of effort and resources.”

ODA has helped secure federal funds for the effort. The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) has also contributed, helping to make FoodHub a truly regional tool. Other supporters and collaborators have joined along the way.

The system is available to food buyers and sellers of all types in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, California, and Alaska. If FoodHub takes off the way everyone hopes, it could become a vehicle for the entire western US. It's a lofty goal but one that many people feel is worth pursuing.

Look for FoodHub representatives at the following events around the state in February:

February 1 – Local Connections, Canby

February 8 – East-Central Oregon Farmer-Chef Connection, Hermiston

February 9 – InFARMation, Portland

February 22 – Food Connection Conference, Ashland

February 26 – Oregon Farmers Market Association Annual Meeting, Corvallis

February 27 – OSU Small Farms Conference, Corvallis

URL: http://www.oregon.gov/ODA/news/pub_0912aq.shtml