

Growing Together:

Connecting Idaho's Farmers' Markets



ABOUT THE IDAHO HUNGER RELIEF TASK FORCE

The Idaho Hunger Relief Task Force is a private non-profit organization that envisions that hunger will not exist in a state as abundant as Idaho. We work to put private and public resources into action to eliminate hunger and provide food security for all Idahoans. See our website at www.idahohunger.org and find us on Facebook.

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INTRODUCTION

Expanding markets

Farmers' markets in Idaho have increased from 24 total markets in 2007 to 55 markets in 2010¹. This increase shows that consumers desire local, fresh, and nutritious food. It also shows that direct marketing of local food products is a viable economic industry in the state.

These markets have been the result of small but dedicated community grassroots organization. Local churches, city halls, non-profits, residents, and farmers have stepped up to fill a needed niche in their hometowns. But so far the efforts have remained local and regional. There has been no connected statewide effort to build on these local food systems.

Although the number of farmers' markets has increased, a statewide system of sustainability would help ensure that the markets can attract a steady stream of customers into the future. A sustainable local food system can also increase the amount of small-scale farmers by offering them more opportunities to market their products.

In March and April of 2010, 20 markets in seven different regions of Idaho participated in focused discussion meetings held by the Idaho Hunger Relief Task Force (IHRTF). These meetings were

¹ Total farmers' market numbers provided by the Idaho State Department of Agriculture (ISDA).

organized to network and discuss three issues: market challenges; market association development; and the 2010 Idaho Hunger Summit.

Strong markets, food justice, and healthy communities

In many areas farmers' markets are not attracting a broad consumer case. In all of Idaho there are customer groups that would like to purchase fresh, local produce but they either are not connected by outreach from the markets or do not have the means, whether it be travel or monetary or other, to shop at a local farmers' market.

There are several areas in the state that are left without a local farmers' market. Residents of these areas do not have the option of purchasing fresh produce from their neighbors and fellow community members.

At least five markets throughout the state will have the capacity to accept food stamp Electronic Benefit Transfers (EBT) in 2010. No markets in Idaho accept Special Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) vouchers because the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare has not implemented the WIC Farmers' Market Program. Although there was a statewide effort to bring the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) to Idaho, there were no federal funds to take on new states in 2010. Idaho is a

rural state with many areas of food deserts. A food desert is generally an area where residents do not have access to a required amount of affordable and nutritious food. In many parts of Idaho there are small towns with just one or two grocery stores. Many of these stores provide a small amount of food that does not meet all of a person's nutritional needs. These stores often sell their food at high prices because there is no competition. Prices are also higher due to the cost of transporting the food from a distribution center.

Residents in these food deserts are forced to buy the more expensive, less nutritional food from their local grocery stores or travel several miles, sometimes as far as 100 miles one way, to shop at large grocery stores such as Wal-Mart, Grocery Outlet, and WinCo. These residents are sacrificing nutrition, money, and time. They could benefit greatly from a system of direct marketing from local food producers. In order to reach these populations, markets need to be able to accept and administer USDA farmers' market nutrition programs.

Growing together

In conjunction with the farmers' market focused discussion groups, the authors of this report also

conducted focus groups with food stamp participants. In all of the focus groups the participants said that they would like to be able to spend their food stamp benefits at a local farmers' market. The participants reported avoiding the farmers' markets because they did not have any extra cash to spend on fresh food and they knew that their food stamp benefits were not accepted. This avoidance not only leads to costs in the residents' nutritional health, but also separates them from their own community.

In a state where nearly 200,000 individuals rely on food stamps to supplement their grocery shopping, farmers' markets are missing out on a population of consumers and overlooking a sector of their own community. And these consumers are missing out on the availability of fresh, nutritious, and local foods.

Other states that have implemented USDA nutrition programs in their farmers' markets have seen sales significantly increase. Markets in Idaho bordering Washington, such as Lewiston and Moscow, have seen the difference these programs make in sales. Implementing USDA nutrition programs in Idaho will strengthen local food systems and will require statewide organization, advocacy, and communication.

FARMERS' MARKET CHALLENGES

Road blocks

Farmers' markets in Idaho share many of the same challenges—from access to outreach to market networking—that can be barriers to creating a sustainable market.

Many of the challenges are due to being isolated from a statewide community of farmers' markets. Although there are 55 markets in the state, there is no statewide networking system. Often, the answer to a challenge has already been addressed by another farmers' market, but since there is no market networking system set up in Idaho, the challenges have to be faced fresh by every market without help from outside their community.

Challenges identified by the focused discussion groups include:

1. *Market sustainability*

- Markets in Idaho are short on manpower. The majority of markets rely on volunteers to work as managers and employees.
- Markets do not have the time or ability to write grants for needed funding.
- Many areas of Idaho have a short growing season, hindering the sustainability of farmers' markets. These short seasons contribute to a lack of “regular” customers for vendors to rely on.

- Market managers would like to push their markets more towards local food vendors, but many of them have a hard time working against an emphasis of craft vendors. The managers do not dislike the craft vendors, but feel that they attract more tourists whereas local food vendors attract community members and bolster a local food system.
- Rural markets face challenges when trying to recruit new produce vendors. Many markets rely on a very small number of strong produce vendors.
- All of the markets shared frustrations with food safety requirements. The markets reported confusion with what the regulations were, how they were enforced, and how the regulations vary from region to region.
- Markets expressed frustration with not having more power related to food policy issues statewide and nationally.

2. *Reaching a new customer base*

- Many markets would like to apply for nutrition programs such as EBT (food stamp) acceptance but do not have the time to apply. Others do not know how to apply or where to find information on

- how to apply.
- Several markets reported problems with outreach. There were challenges with both attracting new customers and new vendors.

3. *Consumer education*

- Markets are concerned about misinformation spread in their communities that farmers' market prices are more expensive than food sold

in grocery stores. The markets were also concerned that there is not much information on the nutritional advantages of buying fresh, local food.

These are not all of the challenges reported by farmers' markets that attended the focused discussion groups, but they are a collection of challenges that are shared by all farmers' markets throughout the state.

ASSOCIATION DEVELOPMENT

The benefits of an association

An Idaho state farmers' market association would be a vendor-driven statewide organization representing separate markets as one unified voice. The ole purpose of an association would be to create more options for farmers' markets to become sustainable and to strengthen community food systems in Idaho.

Farmers' market associations have been proven helpful in other states to improve community food security in areas where local foods are lacking, and to reinforce areas that already have a strong local foods movement.

The focused farmers' market discussion groups held throughout the state identified a need for an Idaho farmers' market association. Several benefits to an association were reported, including:

1. *Farmers' market growth and sustainability*

- The creation of a forum in which markets could discuss common problems and solutions.
- An association could serve as a unified voice representing farmers' markets across Idaho
- An association could offer outreach assistance to attract new customers and recruit new produce and meat vendors.
- An association could offer

assistance with media, marketing, and advertising.

- An association could oversee the development and implementation of new USDA farmers' market nutrition programs to Idaho.
- An association would have the ability to offer an umbrella insurance plan for markets.

2. *Farmers' market resources and assistance*

- A farmers' market association would function as an organizational center that can create statewide guidebooks, brochures, and pamphlets on such things as food safety regulations.
- An association could provide assistance with finding and applying for grants.
- An association could identify areas in Idaho that would benefit from the development of a local farmers' market. An association could then provide resources to the community to implement the market.
- An association could advocate on a policy level to bring more attention to farmers' markets and local foods issues.

Next steps

The markets that participated in the focused group discussions agreed that the creation of a farmers' market association in Idaho must rely on a

well thought out and developed structure. They agreed that a main focus for the development of an association must concentrate on finding funding and creating a sustainable organization.

It was mentioned several times that markets throughout the state must work with each other in a noncompetitive manner in order for an association to be successful. The markets agreed that an association is good for all; so individual markets should not feel the need to compete with other markets in their area or through the state.

To begin the process, the groups decided that there should be a

statewide task force comprised of farmers' market representatives from different regions in the state. These representatives can pinpoint next steps and bring the viewpoint of their own local region to the table.

Many market representatives mentioned that a beginning step would be to find an umbrella organization that would be willing to house the association. One employee whose sole responsibility would be to work on the development of an association would be placed with this umbrella organization. The employee would work with the farmers' market task force to identify next steps and see them through to completion.

FARMERS' MARKET WORKSHOP FOR 2010 SUMMIT ON HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY IN IDAHO

Connecting local foods to hunger and food insecurity

Every two years people from throughout Idaho representing business, agriculture, government, non-profit agencies, schools, faith communities, and Idahoans who have experienced hunger gather at the *Summit on Hunger and Food Insecurity in Idaho*. The purpose of this gathering is to promote collaboration amongst separate sectors to alleviate hunger and food insecurity in Idaho.

The *2010 Summit* will consist of two keynote speakers, one in the morning and one at lunch, and five workshop tracks devoted to: childhood hunger, senior hunger, advocacy, hunger-free community continuums, and farmers' markets. The workshops are action-oriented and designed to create concrete next steps in program and policy solutions for Idaho.

Because an entire workshop will be devoted to farmers' markets, one main purpose of conducting the discussion groups was to gather suggestions for the workshop theme from the market vendors and managers themselves.

Several topics were discussed, including:

1. Consumer education

- Nutrition education for market customers.
- Cooking education for market customers.
- Community education on the real price of food, to dismiss the myth that food is more expensive at farmers' markets.

2. Market sustainability

- Market education on how to attract more produce and meat vendors and customers.
- Market outreach and advertising.
- Improve relationships with local governments.
- Educate on how to create a new market in an area without an existing one.
- Inform markets on what grants are available and how they can find help to apply.
- Food safety education.

3. Reaching a new customer base

- Develop a theme that centers on how to apply for and how to administer nutrition programs, like the acceptance of EBT (food stamps) at markets across Idaho.
- Creating a "culture of acceptance" at markets where

- community members from all income levels and cultural backgrounds feel welcomed.
- How to get left over produce to low-income community members who are not or cannot utilize their local market.
- 3. *Development of an Idaho state farmers' market association***

All of these topics were mentioned at least once, and most of them numerous times, during the farmers' market focused discussion groups.

Only one theme was mentioned by all of the groups. This theme was the development of a statewide farmers' market association. All of the groups felt that a track devoted to the creation of an association would be the best use of the workshop.

MARKETS THAT PARTICIPATED IN THE FOCUSED DISCUSSION GROUPS

Backyard Harvest
Caldwell Farmers' Market
Capital City Public Market
Challis Farmers' Market
Eagle Farmers' Market
Grangeville Farmers' Market
Kootenai County Farmers' Market
Kuna Farmers' Market
Lemhi County Farmers' Market
Lewiston Farmers' Market
McFadden Coop
Middleton Farmers' Market
Moscow Farmers' Market
Moscow Food Coop Growers' Market
Nampa Farmers' Market
Portneuf Valley Farmers' Market
Rathdrum Farmers' Market
Rexburg Farmers' Market
The Farmers' Market at Grand Teton Mall
Twin Falls Farmers' Market