Food Hubs for a Regional Food Economy: A South Central Illinois Study

The face of agriculture has changed drastically. A growing number of farms are extremely large, industrial, mechanized operations that specialize in one or two crops. Small farmers can’t compete with large agricultural operations. Lack of skills or time for marketing, limited selling power at farmers' markets, and inability to distribute products are some of the barriers small farmers face.

Food hubs help make small farms profitable.

Food Hub Feasibility Study: South Central Illinois

**Interviews**

- What barriers prevent small and mid-sized farmers from accessing markets in this region?
- Where would ideal food hub facilities be located within the ten-county region?

**Spatial Data Analysis**

- **Interviews**
  - Farmers
    - Most farmers sell at farmers' markets or through other direct channels. They do not know how to begin selling at grocery stores or restaurants.
    - Farmers produce relatively small amounts. Increasing production requires greater investment.
  - Buyers
    - Restaurants prefer a streamlined ordering process. Buying from local farmers takes a great deal more effort.
    - No transparent method for farmers to pursue grocery store markets exist.
  - Distributors
    - There are no regional wholesalers or distributors in the study area that deal primarily in regionally-grown produce.
    - Existing distributors require farmers to pre-pack produce for sale.
  - Supply
    - Specialty cropland is concentrated primarily in eastern counties.
    - Majority of small farms are also found in eastern counties.
  - Demand
    - The region is very rural but each county contains one major population center.
    - Potential institutional buyers are located in all counties, with a particularly higher concentration in Jefferson County.
  - Infrastructure
    - Interstate and state routes are adequate to fully connect farmers with markets.

**Recommendations**

- Increase production through incubator programs.
  - Use season-extension technologies; increase access to farmland.

- Develop purchasing contracts between farmers and buyers
  - Use focus groups to build relationships and prioritize institutional buyers to meet state procurement goals.

- Implement network of micro-hubs
  - Prioritize aggregation, packing, and cold storage services, as well as marketing and business management. Develop farm pre-planning workshops between farmers.