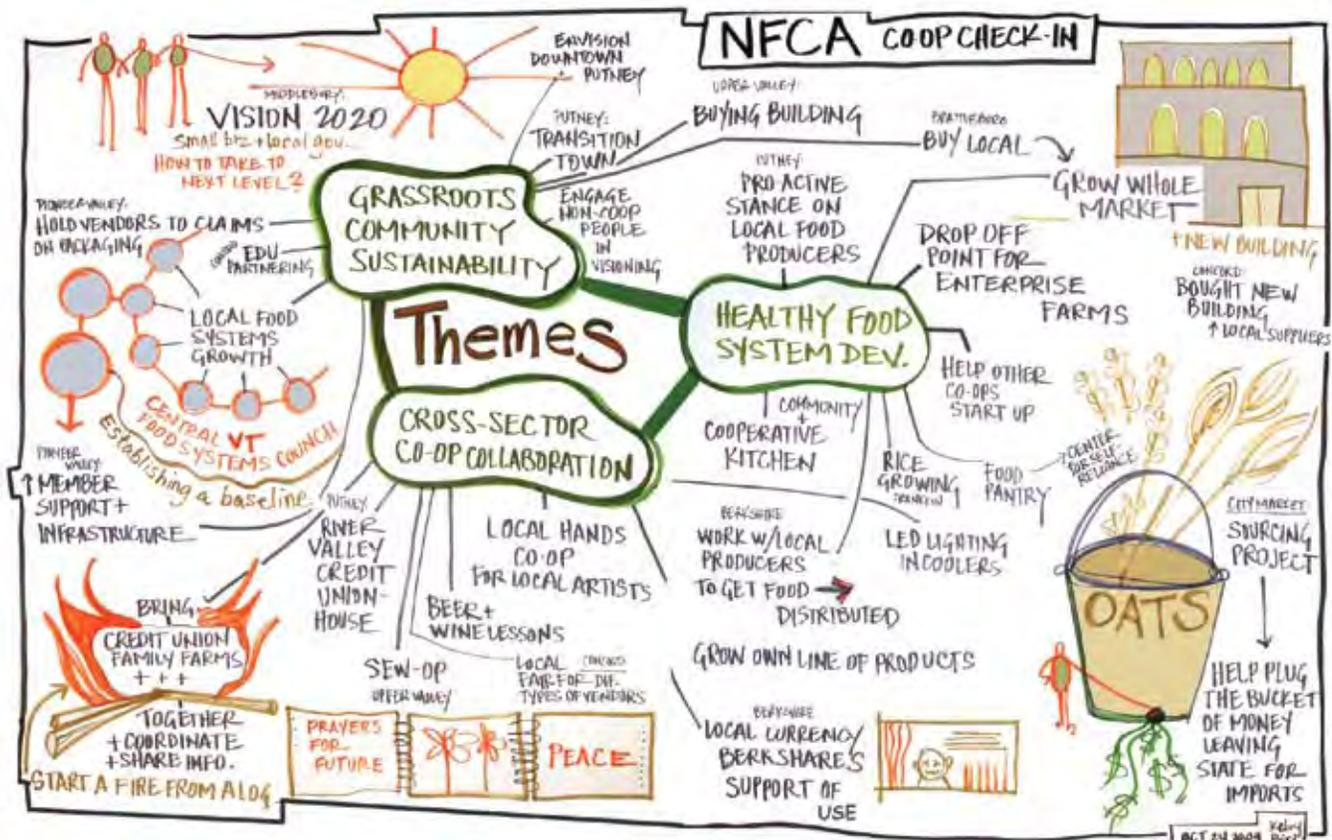


Collaboration and Resilience

Food co-ops and regional food system development

BY ERIC DELUCA*



Fourteen New England food co-ops shared stories of recent strategic activities at the fall 2009 NFCA Leadership Community gathering.

What does it take to cultivate a resilient food system? Regional efforts underway in the Northeast and around the country suggest some inputs and practices that seem to be doing just that. These include:

- Food co-ops collaborating with farmers and support organizations to demonstrate markets and catalyze the supply of healthy food;
- Like-minded networks of food-system leaders sharing information and experiences and strategically directing investments;
- Food centers aggregating product, connecting

* Thanks also to: Robin Seydel, Kathryn Ruhf, Kate Clancy, Sue Honkamp, and Monty Fischer.

For references to many of the people and documents mentioned in this article, see the online version at cooperativegrocer.coop.

with institutions, and incubating next generation growers and value-added producers;

- Scale-sensitive research, grounding coordinated efforts and informing infrastructure development to address bottlenecks.

Combined, these efforts lead the way if we can learn from them and replicate their successes.

Food co-ops, diversified growers, and infrastructure solutions

Jack Lazor is a farmer with over 30 years of diversified, organic experience. He and his wife, Anne, operate Butterworks Farm, whose value-added dairy enterprise produces organic yogurt well-loved by Vermonters. Based in Westfield, Vt., the farm generates 35 percent of its energy with a 75-foot wind turbine on the property. Lazor also leads a burgeoning grain-growing community with colleagues such as Organic Valley dairy farmer Brent Beidler. Food co-ops can support farming innovators like Lazor not only by stocking his

yogurt, but powerfully by compiling and sharing data about the market for regionally produced food.

City Market is an urban food co-op in Burlington, Vt. In the fall semester of 2009, City Market General Manager Clem Nilan worked with a team of University of Vermont (UVM) undergraduates to analyze the co-op's bulk bins for untapped regional sourcing opportunities. With the help of UVM Extension Services grain specialist Dr. Heather Darby, the team identified organic oats as an opportunity, both from an agricultural and an economic perspective.

City Market is an active member of the Neighboring Food Cooperative Association (NFCA)—an alliance of over 15 community-owned retail food co-ops collaborating for a thriving regional economy through a healthy food system and cross-sector co-op collaboration. It turns out that 12 NFCA member co-ops—according to data collected in November 2009—move 53,152 pounds of organic

◀ rolled oats and 15,618 pounds of steel-cut oats in a year. That's a lot of oats! It's certainly more than Lazor expects to produce this year.

But having that market data helped Lazor seek funding for processing equipment that would support the next step of his enterprise. Through committing to source from nearby where possible and by documenting current demand, food co-ops can serve as a catalyst for the infrastructure needed to create a resilient food system. As diverse stakeholders see the value of healthy food, collaborative networks of food system leaders can attract and direct funding to the places it will make a difference, like Lazor's grain operation.

Collaborative networks

Cooperative Development Services Executive Director Kevin Edberg recently reflected on two years of multi-organization network development. The work focused on mutual understanding of each other's work and the challenges of growing the production and markets for "good food." Edberg said, "I appreciated the greater camaraderie and a growing willingness of groups to partner on projects, engaging each other in their areas of particular expertise."

His experience resonates with effective models being demonstrated in multiple regions around the country. Regional food commerce in Iowa, for example, is growing thanks to an aggregation of working groups—an excellent forum for idea generation, networking, and information dissemination. The coordinating group is Value Chain Partnerships (VCP), an Iowa-based network for food and agriculture working groups.

The Regional Food System Working Group (RFSWG) is one key member of VCP. RFSWG is an umbrella network for all Iowans working to build a more resilient regional food system. Their meetings consistently inspire and motivate nearly 100 members who represent their own local groups. RFSWG offers a collaborative environment for this diverse network of farmers, community leaders, and nonprofit, government, and private organizations to share resources and support. It works to maximize the potential for community-based, economically sustainable, and environmentally and socially responsible regional food enterprises by supporting education, conducting research, and facilitating state and local partnerships.

Another collaborative network is the Vermont

Agriculture Innovation Center (AIC). The AIC was established and is funded through appropriations secured by Senator Patrick Leahy, totaling \$1.49 million, through the USDA budget. Leveraging the USDA funds with a one-third match, the AIC board is overseeing \$711,100 in food-system development funding from its 2009 workplan and will be allocating an additional \$1.5M through September 2011. Strategic priorities include next-generation food system leadership development and innovative technical assistance for value-added agricultural enterprises that support success throughout the supply chain.

The AIC's board reflects the components of Vermont's food system. Food co-ops represent retail because of their combination of concern for community and market impact. (Vermont's food co-ops generated over \$80M in annual revenue in 2009 and 2007 employment figures showed Vermont food co-ops as among the top 25 employers in the state.) Organic Valley farmer ambassador Regina Beidler represents the dairy industry (dairy being one of the state's four highest grossing farm product categories). Another voice on the board is the Vermont Food Funders Network, a group of

Strategies for Building Regional Food Systems through Collaborative Networks

MEASURE IMPACT

Contract with an independent economic analyst to establish and update baseline impact measures.

Analyze the cooperative enterprise presence in your field at the regional level.

Integrate national cross-sector data available through the National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA).

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

Communicate impact to co-op members, the general public, networks and policy-makers.

Cultivate and promote communication and coordination at the system level.

Promote and communicate cooperative identity and difference to your members.

Identify and promote co-ops' unique contribution to these objectives.

Define and communicate the value of cross-sector collaboration for your members.

BUILD NETWORK PARTNERSHIPS

Conduct outreach with like-minded organizations that share your objectives.

Reach out to other co-op sectors in your system field (such as retail food co-ops and dairy or produce marketing co-ops).

Remember that cross-sector co-op support organizations (secondary co-ops) can play a key role in relationship building (such as the Cooperative Fund of New England or NCBA).

BE STRATEGIC

Identify overarching goal(s) and focus. Grow your measured impact.

Seek ways to develop and connect shared desired outcomes.

Avoid "reinventing the wheel" where co-ops and support organizations have developed infrastructure, resources, and best practices.

Identify and protect fundamental resources (farmland preservation, cooperative infrastructure).

Work with other sectors to preserve shared resources.

BE INNOVATIVE

Ask: What would an optimal regional system look like? What's the next step? Who needs to be at the table?

Take into account climate change and uncertain supplies of fossil fuel.

Seek out emerging sources of innovation among co-ops.

Reach out to co-ops in other sectors that have demonstrated innovation or have developed models for cultivating innovation.

BUILD AND LEVERAGE THE FUTURE TOGETHER

Leverage resources and be alert for opportunities to attract funding as a network.

Staff strategically to achieve regional collaboration and optimize sourcing from nearby.

Explore network staffing to support regional research, coordination, and relationship-building, which can catalyze quantum leaps at the system level.

—Eric DeLuca, NFCA, and
Erbin Crowell, Cooperative Fund of New England

foundations whose purpose is to build relationships, mutual understanding, knowledge, and awareness of issues to ensure they are making the most effective and best-leveraged use of philanthropic dollars to achieve desired outcomes. In this high-impact collaborative planning context, cooperative enterprise shows up as a source of empowerment for farmers and communities.

While co-ops can be collaborative leaders in directing funding for healthy food system development, they can also help sustainable food economies develop on the ground as a key supply chain partner. In the Southwest, co-ops provide access to markets for producers and products, create distribution networks, and provide seed money for farm expansion. La Montañita Co-op is co-developing and marketing value chain products including a New Mexico-grown, milled, and baked wheat baguette and the new Big B's pomegranate/apple juice, which brings several apple growers from the northern part of the state together with a pomegranate grower from the southern part. Together, they are creating an income stream from a high-quality, healthy product using fruit that formerly would have been composted due to size, shape or weather damage.

The Agri-Cultura Network is an example of the variety of exciting collaborations coming together among farmers and gardeners to “scale up” in the Southwest. Agri-Cultura utilizes the skills of mentor farmers to train new farmers, helps set up cooperative marketing agreements that aggregate product to provide the quantities needed for large purchasers—including public school systems—and keeps agricultural land in production by matching new and young farmers with land in the traditionally farm-based “South Valley” at the edge of the Albuquerque city limits.

Regional food centers

Next steps for healthy food system development in the Southwest region include building infrastructure, such as “food centers” that serve as depots for farmer food aggregation. Food centers feature refrigerators/freezers/packing and processing equipment, value-added production kitchens, and community-owned grocery stores, providing access in the many rural food deserts.

The food center theme is at the heart of innovation in the Northeast as well. Massachusetts-based CISA (Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture) connects farmers to institutions and schools, provides technical assistance, and collaboratively supports infrastructure development. In 1999, CISA launched a pioneering buy-local marketing campaign—Be a Local Hero, Buy Locally Grown®. Ten miles away, River Valley Market opened in 2008 and reported over \$8 million in sales for its 2009 fiscal year. From its opening day, the co-op has helped customers identify where their food comes from through a food labeling system that includes CISA's Be A Local Hero, Buy Locally Grown signage.

Vermont Regional Food Centers work with communities on developing right-sized infrastructure that supports Vermont farms, local agriculture economies, and community vitality. Their strategy is to expand local food access, shorten supply chains, promote fair prices to farmers, increase efficiency, and support the success of farmers and food-related businesses. These eight food centers from across the state have found that collaborative planning results in greater access to funding and more meaningful results for farmers, communities, individuals and families.

One such center, Burlington, Vt.'s Intervale Center—whose board members include City Market's Nilan—was among 24 worldwide Community Food Enterprises (CFE) profiled in a 2009 report by the Wallace Center at Winrock International and Business Alliance for Local Living Economies. John Fisk, director of the Wallace Center and CFE co-project lead, provided this context: “Our case studies, including Intervale, showcase the ways in which community food enterprises are harnessing innovative and increasingly competitive business models that bring with them not just healthier food, but healthier economies.”

Another Vermont regional food center, Hardwick's Center for an Agricultural Economy, had the foresight to understand that building a new, local food system would require establishing and nurturing a network of public, private

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◀ nonprofit, and academic partners who will bring an array of resources to the table. Among the full range of local agricultural businesses represented on the Center's board is NFCA member Buffalo Mountain Co-op. [Editor's note: A future issue of CG will present more on these local food centers.]

Scale and sustainability: regionality

Network partnerships and the regional sourcing of food have begun to benefit communities economically and agriculturally. Outcomes include healthier people, increasingly resilient communities, and interconnected sustainability initiatives. Communication and coordination are the key success factors and can build genuine value from the individual to the community and on up to the region and the larger region of regions.

Kate Clancy and Kathryn Ruhf are leaders in developing a regional approach to food systems. Clancy is a food systems consultant and a senior fellow at the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, and Ruhf is coordinator of the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NESAWG). They suggest that the regional scale

may be optimal across four key dimensions: food needs and supply, environmental sustainability, economic development, and diversity. Their assertion is that a regional food system is "greater than the sum of its 'locals'" and that it may be the best framework for re-visioning the food system.

NESAWG coordinates multiple work groups addressing issues such as infrastructure, distribution logistics, and research. NFCA, along with Glynwood, Inc.—a nonprofit that helps communities in the Northeast save farming—leads the infrastructure work group, which is addressing the question of appropriately scaled processing facilities. Already, the work group's inventorying of existing infrastructure is informing Vermont's development of a 10-year strategic plan for the farm and food sector of its economy (through the Vermont Farm to Plate Initiative).

This inventory was conducted by staff from the Northeast Organic Farming Association's Vermont chapter. USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack visited NOFA Vermont's annual winter conference in February 2010 and said USDA's FY2011 budget "provides funding to support coordination of regional

planning activities and establishes a set-aside that is roughly 5 percent of the funding, about \$280 million, from approximately 20 existing programs that will be allocated competitively among regional pilot projects tailored to local needs and opportunities."

NFCA has shared its Economic Impact Study with NESAWG's research working group—co-led by the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development and the Tufts University Agriculture, Food and Environment Program—as well as with myriad food system development initiatives. By quantifying regional sourcing, community impact, and membership statistics, food co-ops demonstrate demand for healthy, sustainably produced food and establish the economic relevance of cooperative enterprise.

Clancy and Ruhf suggest that an ideal regional food system provides as much food as possible to meet the population's food needs from supply chains at multiple levels and scales based in the region. As we seek to meet the food needs of our communities, communication and coordination at the regional level powerfully leverages the significant and measurable impact food co-ops are already demonstrating. ■

POSITION OPENINGS

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The Grain Train is located in the heart of the beautiful resort community of Petoskey, Mich. on Little Traverse Bay. The Grain Train has been a vibrant part of this community for more than 25 years. We have more than 2,000 members and the store employs 40+ staff. The store has 4,500 sq. feet of floor space and currently draws \$3 million+ in annual sales.

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