AGENDA PRIORITIES

25. Develop systems for collecting and sharing production and market data and other data relevant to regional food supply chain development.

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LEVERAGE THE INFORMATION AGE TO BUILD NEEDED BASE OF LOCAL FARM AND FOOD DATA

Rowan Bunce is one of those new generation farmers raising a variety of food products for local markets. He and his business partner employ themselves full time in Chatham, between Marquette and Munising in the Upper Peninsula. On their Rock River Farm they produce 75 crops on a 2.5-acre vegetable plot and in six passive solar greenhouses, or hoop houses. They also raise and market chicken and pigs.

"We're pretty much focused on getting food to the central UP, a radius of maybe 100 miles," Bunce said. "We have direct sales right to customers and through CSA shares (Community Supported Agriculture). We sell to the Marquette Food Co-op, to local restaurants, and a few institutions like Marquette General Hospital."

Photo courtesy of Rock River Farm

Managing that kind of operation — especially tracking what's working and what's not — takes a lot of attention to detail. That's why Bunce is excited about new software he's beta testing, specifically designed for smaller, highly diversified farms. The online software, AgSquared, helps small farm entrepreneurs move beyond trying to develop and link a bunch of spreadsheets on multiple aspects of their diversified farms. Bunce says AgSquared has built-in linkages that allow him to drill down on a given section of growing space at any point in time and assess what he planned to do, what he did, and what happened in the actual season. "The amount of information we glean about our operation, it's incredibly valuable for us," he said.

Also interested is the Marquette Food Coop, one of the bigger local food buyers in the region. They could make good use of information the software might help gather about what all the co-op's local farm vendors are producing, when different things are ready, and when some factor like weather will affect projected supply. Natasha Lantz, community liaison for the Marquette Food Cooperative, says the co-op could benefit from local production data that more tailored software like AgSquared could help farms generate. The co-op plans to explore such opportunities as it works into a potential future role as a regional food hub. In early 2013, the co-op will move into a space three times its current size that will allow it to expand into aggregation and distribution of local food.

"Software developed by companies like AgSquared will allow farmers to better predict yields," Lantz said, which can help the co-op plan for those times it needs to fill gaps in local supply with food from national sources. "Additionally, farmers using the software will be able to produce planting schedules that will hopefully lead to a more consistent supply of local produce coming into our store," she said.

Need
Most of the information technology available for agricultural operations is designed for the much larger and less diversified operations that produce the vast majority of farm products.

Seventy-five percent of Michigan's total agricultural sales, for example, come from just six percent of its farms.[1] They tend to specialize in large volumes of a few crops, not smaller volumes of many crops.

In addition to the lack of suitable information technology for smaller farm businesses, aggregate data about smaller farm production and sales is also scarce, even as the niche and local markets these farms serve continue to proliferate. Such market size and trend data is essential for helping farms, food businesses, industry associations, and government agencies know what's happening. It helps the private sector with business planning and the public sector with design and delivery of services.

Opportunity

An increasing number of food producers and buyers, such as hospitals and grocery chains, are trying to understand and work profitably within growing local, regional, and specialty food markets. Michigan can increase the amount and success of investment in this sector by collecting and providing more information about it.

Southwestern Michigan's bedding plant industry, for example, has 32 million square feet of greenhouse space sitting mostly idle in the winter. Many growers are interested in adding a winter produce crop for regional markets. They lack relevant market and production data to assess risks and opportunities and build business plans.

Action

Steps that local and state leaders can take to improve information about the size, potential and status of markets for good food include:

- *Encourage the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to leverage its long-standing collaboration with the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) and Michigan State University (MSU) to initiate a series of surveys that provide ongoing information.*

- *Consider development of support services, such as MSU's longstanding Telfarm Center, which helps farms collect and analyze financial records. Such help centers can support farms in technology adoption and data collection. They can also aggregate incoming data for bigger picture analysis.*

- *Sponsor pilot projects that support adoption of new technology among farms and data collection processes. One opportunity is the establishment of regional food hubs in Michigan. Hubs could provide intermediary data collection services. Software companies like AgSquared may partner in such efforts.*

- *Work with industry groups and associations, whose members, such as retail grocers, may already collect relevant data, or have the technological capacity with UPC codes and the like to do so. Design a collaborative effort to leverage some of their existing data collection and aggregate it so that it is available for wider use without compromising any one company's confidentiality.*

1-2-3 Go!

High-speed Internet! Farms need it to use many online-based services. They can also use assistance obtaining needed devices and entering data. Make sure local farm needs are included in discussions about making high-speed Internet more widely available. Consider getting information technology students to work with farms to enter data.

[1]U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2007) 2007 Census of Agriculture, Farms by Concentration of Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold (Table 40).

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