



Local Foods Endeavors within Region Five

The geographic areas encompassed in this initiative are five counties in central Minnesota with a total population of 162,000: Crow Wing, Cass, Morrison, Todd and Wadena Counties. Part of the region is very rural and comprises two of the poorest counties in the state (Todd, Wadena),

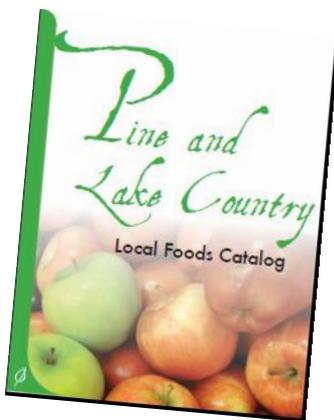
made up of primarily agricultural communities, while two of the region's counties (Crow Wing and lower Cass) make up the majority of the population and growth. The largest city in the region by a factor of 3, Brainerd/Baxter in Crow Wing County, has been ranked one of the fastest growing micropolitans in the nation. The rapid growing lake counties have a seasonal population that expands from 10,000 to nearly 60,000 which can be considered an asset in the development of a successful Local Foods Hub.

The 7-year history set forth in this paper is intended to inform partners of regional activities performed by numerous regional champions, whose purpose is advancing the supply and use of locally grown foods.

2007 Executive Director of the Region Five Development Commission (R5DC) joined the University of MN Regional Sustainable Partnerships: Pine and Lake Country Local Food Workgroup to identify how we could collectively improve access to locally grown commodities, and continued this activity through 2008, assessing the needs of this recognized economic opportunity.

2009 Concentration began with the producer/supply side with a focus on growers:

- **R5DC Co-Sponsored our first Local Foods AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America)** with UofM Regional Sustainable Development Partnership. Considerable amount of research was conducted by the AmeriCorps VISTA regarding national models of local foods distribution systems for consideration of the Pine and Lake Country Local Foods working group (Supported by the MN Farmers Union and the Initiative Foundation).
 - **Surveyed growers** to identify willingness to produce more local food for schools, hospitals, and restaurants, had more than 150 growers interested (All growers have less than 250 acres, many with less than 50).
 - **Co-hosted forums** to teach growers requirements to sell commodities. Hosted workshop on how to access USDA value added Ag NOFA (22 growers).
 - Obtained funding and **Published 5000 copies of a Pine and Lake Country Local Foods Catalog**, distributed to region. Supported by R5DC and the Regional Partnerships.
- **R5DC interviewed 22 chefs** to gauge interest in sourcing more locally grown foods, had high level of interest and commitment.



- **Started 9 community gardens**, some of which are now selling food at farmers markets. Teamed with Extension Services and Master Gardeners to provide training to growers. (Supported by Statewide Health Improvement Partnership “SHIP” funding)

2010 Focused on the **buyer/demand side** by developing relationship with institutions interested in sourcing locally grown foods.

- Hired second Local Foods AmeriCorps VISTA, workplan supported building the demand side of the regional local foods Hub.
- Met several **times with 3 local hospitals**, one in particular which was sourcing nearly 2% of their food from local growers and increased commitment to sourcing up to 15% once distribution is in place.
- **Chefs began to meet regularly** to exchange buying BMP’s and to understand the fair market rate of locally grown commodities.
- **Growers worked for FREE** in some of the restaurants a few hours a week to better understand the kitchen limitations the chefs are faced with and to build relations.
- **Speed Dating event with growers and Schools, hosted by the Regional Sustainable Partnerships. MANY introductions started through this event. Met Champions at this event. Notably, Arlene Jones, Farm on St. Mathias and Brainerd School District food service Manager, Collette Polkamp.**
- **Farm 2 School research** conducted by The Regional Sustainable Partnerships, supported by the Initiative Foundation. Found at: <http://regionfive.org/departments/community-development.html>



- **Growers gave school cafeteria presentations**, to assist in the educational opportunities of students for those districts who would source from local growers. Teachers loved this partnership!
- **Met many times with superintendents and kitchen managers** of several school districts to gauge interest. Resulted in great enthusiasm with the School Board of largest school district in the region (School District 181) committing to sourcing very specific quantities of locally grown foods, should a distribution system be launched to deliver foods regularly.
- VISTA convened a committed group of growers, community Ed, public health and school district representatives to discuss how we could pursue the development of a model distribution system. **We decided to** create a workgroup to complete a distribution system and climate controlled storage business plan and feasibility.

2011 Completed a **Business plan** and sought research and supportive sources:

- January 4, 2011 **met with Rural Development** to discuss potential USDA Rural Development programs that align with region's local food goals.
- Todd County Board of Commissioners agreed to pursue the **bonding process of \$500,000.00 to build a Community Kitchen** at the Senior Center in the small town of Eagle Bend. This town is centrally located in the county and many growers would have access to adding value to their commodities (value added AG) and could benefit from a distribution system as the market demand increases.
- Partnering as a workgroup member in developing the business plan, the opportunity was presented to the collective to **lease warehouse space from School District 181** at a very competitive rate. Conversations with Central Lakes College began regarding similar opportunities. Schools are seeking all sort of ethical alternatives to income generation in these economically distressed times. This effort aligns the schools with the local foods efforts and builds sustainable and lasting partnerships.

2012 Expanded the "demand" and more private sector firms expressed interest in participating in the local foods endeavor:

- Offered **microloans to ag-based businesses** to scale up production in order to meet the increased demand (USDA RMAP program).
- Completed the business plan that formalized the **legal status of "SPROUT"** as a MN non-profit and a private LLC. The plan was completed by Julie Anderholm of the Central Lakes College Small Business Development Center, BJ Allen, a private consultant with JBJ World and Arlene Jones with the Farm on St. Mathias.

Found at:

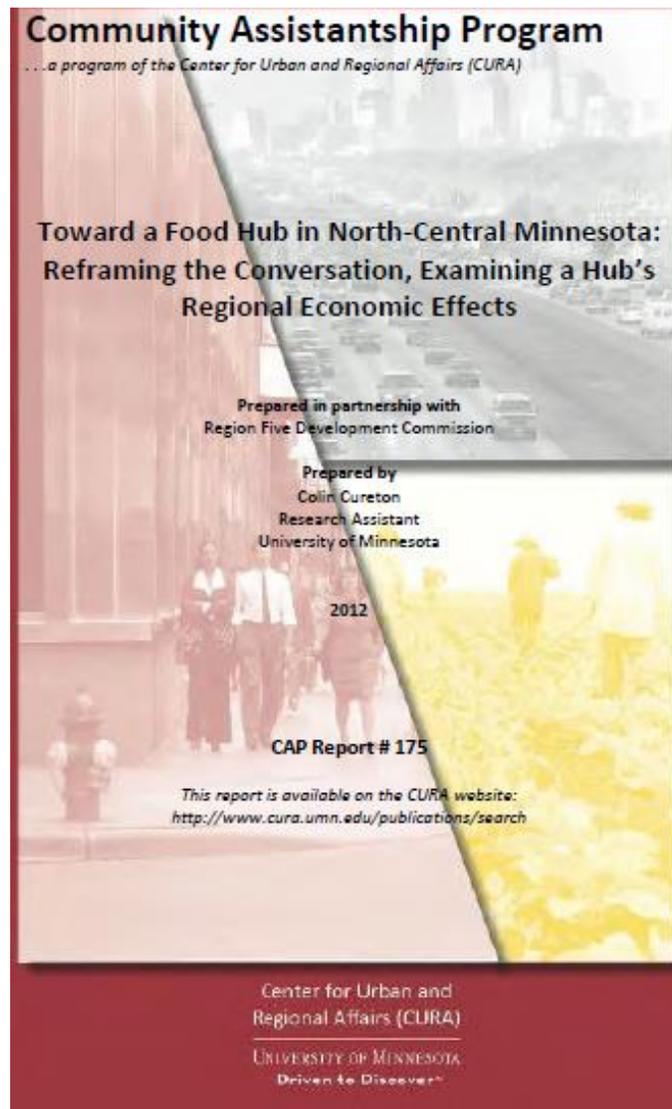
<http://regionfive.org/departments/community-development.html>

- **The SPROUT collaborative expanded to** small volume growers, School Districts, Chefs and resort/restaurant managers, community college, sustainable farming association, government, public health, food shelves, 2 health care institutions, community ED and food related social advocacy groups.





- A new VISTA was hired to create the “Food Recovery Project,” a gleaning program that allows low-income families to harvest unused “seconds or culls” from local farms or for this locally grown and healthy food to enter into the food shelf systems.
- More research completed on the effect on **Food Hubs** from the UofM – supported by the Initiative Foundation. Found at: <http://regionfive.org/departments/community-development.html>



- Feasibility Study and business plan formation completed for the value chain food hub **and** construction of additional **food processing facilities**, paid for by AURI, the Initiative Foundation, the University of Minnesota Central Region Partnership, and Happy Dancing Turtle. Found at: <http://regionfive.org/departments/community-development.html>



- The UofM Extension hired a full time staff person dedicated to providing Local Foods **technical assistance to growers and buyers for the next 4 years** as a result of a grant from the MN Dept. of Health.
- **USDA funded** Region Five with and RCDI to move forward this project and 9 others from the Resilient Region Plan toward implementation.
- A local restaurant, Prairie Bay, purchased a **Food Truck** that will use as much locally grown commodities as possible. Recent grants support this truck to travel to very rural Food Desert areas as a way to provide education about how to prepare locally grown produce and then work to establish the distribution plan to GET LOCALLY Grown foods to those areas on a regular basis.



2013 – Connecting with supportive partners for our self-sustaining model.

- Local Food value-added agricultural project represents a priority area selected by the region through the HUD-DOT-EPA-funded Sustainable Communities Regional Planning process called “The Resilient Region” initiative. *The local food hub project has three main components:*

- 1) *Establish a regional food hub for the aggregation and distribution of locally produced foods;*
- 2) *Extend the growing season through proving the use of locally manufactured solar thermal collectors combined with high tunnels; and*
- 3) *Coordinate outreach, education, and technical assistance activities that will expand the availability of local foods in the region, targeting both farmers and consumers.*

- Local food Champion Arlene Jones, the SPROUT Food Hub Manager was awarded a fellowship in the BUSH Foundation Leadership training program to build the local food hub infrastructure.

- SPROUT and Arlene Jones hosted 25 growers at a Good Agricultural Practice workshop, instructed by the University of Minnesota in June of 2013.



Local Foods related MICRO-LENDING activity has been on the rise (micro \$ used for only a portion of the lending needs).

- **Long Prairie MN – Value added business package with the local food theme including growth of the local foods; processing, distribution and sales using the Latino heritage as owners, workers and promoters in the Long Prairie, Todd County area. This is a start-up business. \$500,000**
- **Wadena MN – Again, using the value added business package with a bakery theme. A new business start-up in a closed bakery facility. Embracing the local food theme for the local growth, processing, distribution and sales of product. This format also includes diversification into providing a home base for the local senior’s in-home food delivery program – Meals on Wheels. \$350,000**
- **Menahga MN – Using a unique existing value added food footprint of an existing local foods grocery business, the addition of a health bakery goods extension of that business allows this established business the opportunity to expand into a publically requested diversification of local foods in the Wadena County Area. \$75,000**

Secured grant activity:	Amount
Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships	\$ 50,000
Otto Bremer Foundation	\$ 50,000
Northwest Area Foundation	\$ 75,000
BUSH Foundation (Arlene Jones Fellowship)	\$ 75,000
Regional Sustainable Development Partnership _ to Prairie Bay for Food Truck	\$ 35,000
Initiative Foundation (research projects; CURA CAP \$7,500, business plan \$5k, F2S \$5k does not include support of VISTAs)	\$ 17,500

Pending:

Cote Foundation -- \$35,000

Happy Dancing Turtle - \$5,000

Denied:

Minnesota Department of Agriculture - \$70K

BCBS - \$30K

SURDNA Foundation - \$180K

Ben & Jerrys \$5k

HHS - \$300K

St. Joe’s Foundation \$5k

With over 160 food distribution models currently in operation around the nation, we have benefited from learning opportunities through these various models, and have patterned our model from some of these successful examples in building a value chain food hub.

Let’s make the assumption that we can all make the connections to the value of creating a regional local food economy; reduction of VMT’s, increased incomes of small agricultural producers (wealth creation), reduction of sprawl (keeping ag land in ag), increased access to nutritional foods (health benefits), making the URBAN-RURAL connection, adding to our QUALITY OF PLACE and this list goes on and on. Several economic impact studies have been published regarding the positive community multiplier as a result of sourcing local foods.

As we continue efforts to build new partnerships we will document our process and create user friendly resources that will enable other areas to replicate this work. We are particularly interested in developing an inclusive model, incorporating immigrant, Native, and other populations, and our group is COMMITTED to assisting other regions who are interested in replication of a successful model.