



## 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),

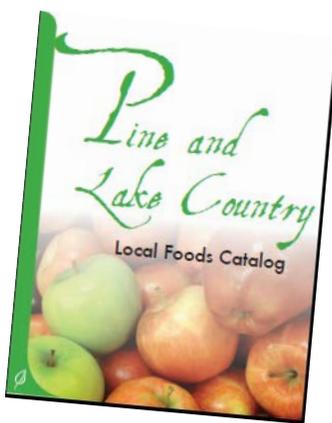
made up of primarily agricultural communities, while two of the region's counties (Crow Wing and lower Cass) make up the majority of the population and growth. The largest city in the region by a factor of 3, Brainerd/Baxter in Crow Wing County, has been ranked one of the fastest growing micropolitans 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 outline below provides a brief sketch of the work achieved as part of our regional efforts to advance the supply and use of locally grown foods.

**In 2007** Executive Director of the R5DC became member of the University of MN Regional Sustainable Partnerships: Pine and Lake Country Local Food Workgroup to find ways we could work together. Continued this activity through 2008, assessing the needs of this cluster.

**In 2009** concentration was given to the **producer side**:

- **Brought on the first Local Foods Vista** with UofM Regional Sustainable Development Partnership as co-sponsors with R5DC. Considerable amount of research was conducted by the AmeriCorps VISTA regarding national models of local foods distribution systems and shared with the Pine and Lake Country Local Foods Workgroup. 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. Gave 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.
- **Cheryl Hills interviewed 22 chefs** to gauge interest in sourcing more locally grown foods, had high level of interest and commitment.
- **Started 9 community gardens** with low income families, some of which are now selling food at farmers markets. Teamed with Extension Services and Master Gardeners to provide training to growers. Supported by SHIP funding.



- **Obtained funding and opened a Community Kitchen** in city of Wadena to allow growers to add value to commodities. Supported by Otto Bremer Foundation.

**In 2010** we focused on the **buyer side** by developing relationship with institutions interested in sourcing locally grown foods.

- Hired second Local Foods AmeriCorps VISTA.
- We **met many times with 3 hospitals**, one in particular which was sourcing nearly 2% of their food from local growers and has now committed to sourcing up to 15% if we can find a way to deal with the distribution issue.
- **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.***
- **Farm 2 School research** conducted by The Regional Sustainable Partnerships



- **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 system be launched to deliver foods regularly.....i.e., a distribution system.
- 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.

In 2011 we created a plan and sought research and supportive sources:

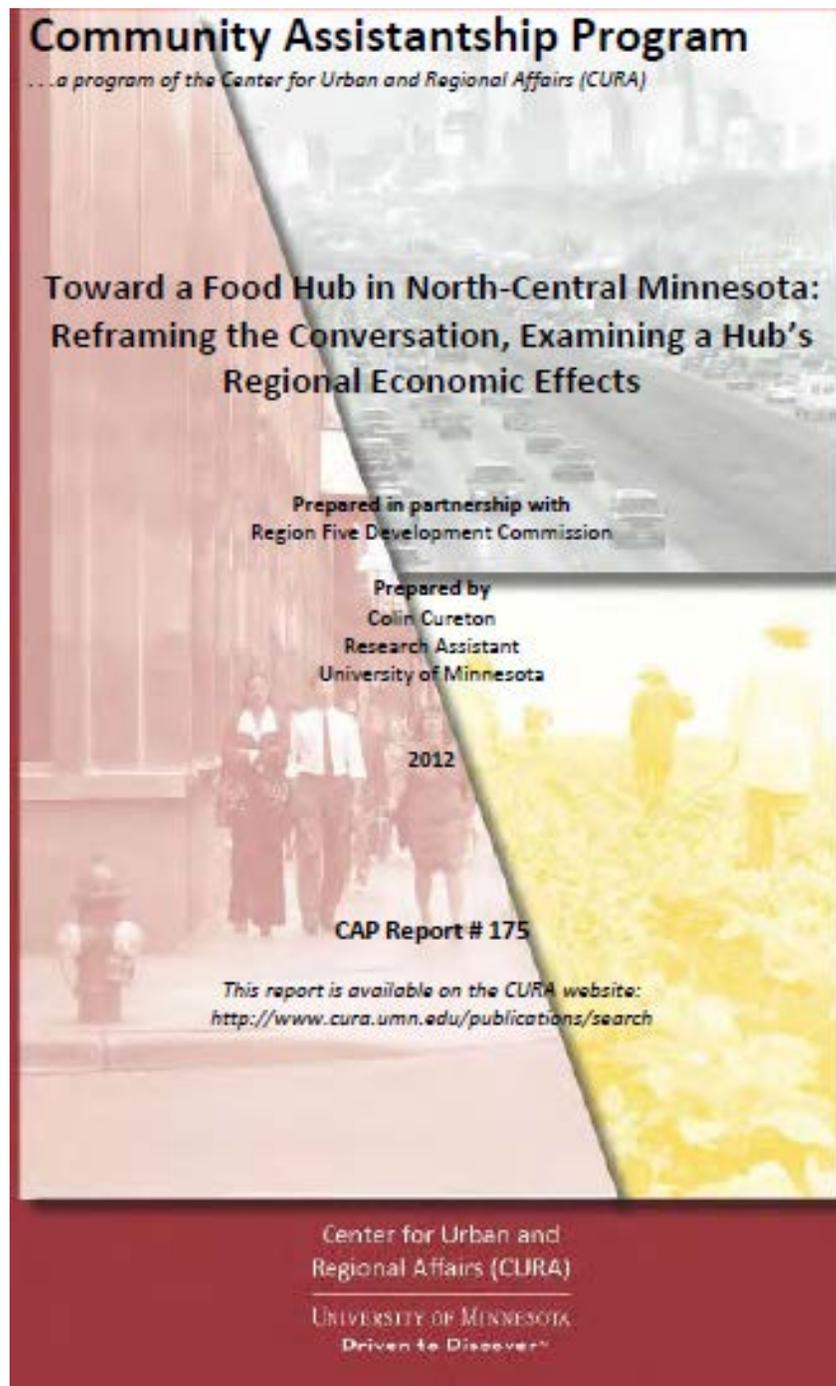
- January 4, 2011 **met with Rural Development** to discuss potential USDA Rural Development programs that align with this effort.
- Todd County Board of Commissioners agreed to pursue the **bonding process of \$500,000.00 to build a Community Kitchen** at the Senior Center in the small town of Eagle 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.
- **The collaborative was established & consists of** 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.

In 2012 we have expanded the “demand” and more private sector agencies want to participate in the local foods endeavor:

- We have started to give **microloans to ag based businesses** to scale up production in order to meet the increased demand.
- We have expanded the local school district and community hospital demand exponentially!  
The USDA grant scored well but was not funded.
- We completed the business plan that formalize the **legal status of “SPROUT”** as a MN non-profit and a private LLC. The plan was completed by the Central Lakes College Small Business Development Center; Julie Anderholm, a private consultant; BJ Allen with JBJ World and Arlene Jones with the Farm of St. Mathias. Support was provided by Region Five to complete this work.



- We have a **new VISTA working on creation of a “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.



- 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.



- The UofM Extension has 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 RR Plan toward implementation.
- A local restaurant, Prairie Bay, has purchased a **Food Truck** that will exclusively use local foods. Our desire is to get this truck into 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.



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

This value-added agricultural project represents a priority area selected by the community through the HUD-DOT-EPA-funded Sustainable Communities Regional Planning process.

The project has three 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.

<b>Funder</b>	<b>Amount</b>
St Joseph's Foundation - Essentia (Pending)	\$ 5,000
Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships <b>(SECURED)</b>	\$ 50,000
Happy Dancing Turtle <b>(Secured)</b>	\$ 5,000
Otto Bremer (Pending)	\$ 50,000
Cote Foundation (Pending)	\$ 35,000
Northwest Area Foundation <b>(Secured)</b>	\$ 75,000

Denied:

Minnesota Department of Agriculture - \$70K

Initiative Foundation - \$10K

SUNDRA Foundation - \$180K

HHS - \$300K

BCBS - \$30K

BUSH/InCommons - \$70K

Ben & Jerrys \$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 - 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.

**WHEN** we are successful in obtaining full support we will document our process and create user friendly resources that will enable other areas to replicate this work. We are particularly interested in assisting immigrant populations into this model and our group is COMMITTED to assisting other regions who are interested in replication of a successful model.