

FoodHub in the News



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By Rob Manning

Food Hub Will Connect Local Farmers with Customers

PORTLAND, OR – *One of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's top officials came to Portland this week to check out a network meant to connect Northwest farmers and the customers who love their food.*

It's called FoodHub and it's drawn some unlikely participants and supporters, as Rob Manning reports.

Portland's New Seasons supermarket prides itself on local connections. Once a year, it even brings into its store the eastern Oregon ranchers who raise the beef found behind the meat counter.

Supermarket president, Lisa Sedlar says customers get a kick out of seeing the ranchers' ten-gallon hats up above the meat case.

Lisa Sedlar: "You can spot them from a mile away – they're wearing their Wranglers and their cowboy boots and so they create a little bit of theater. But then for the eater to connect with the grower in such a meaningful way is really something that's unique and different about Portland."

Sedlar was talking to Ann Wright, a deputy undersecretary at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. She came to town promoting a program called "Know Your Farmer," so she's listening to success stories – but also for problems.

Wright says the problem isn't on the supply or demand side.

Ann Wright: "The demand is there, it's trying to create connections between buyers and sellers, and trying to bring them together and understand each other, and grow relationships, so those markets work."

But Lisa Sedlar says that even a company with nine outlets and a "buy local" reputation, like New Seasons, can find it hard to connect with local suppliers.

She has long wished for a system where she could connect directly with growers.

Lisa Sedlar: "You know – farmer Bob has this many cranberries for sale, and farmer Sally has this many cranberries for sale, and I could just order ten cases from them, and ten cases from them, and then I'd have more than one local resource."

It hasn't been easy for growers to make the connections either.

Vicki Hertel runs Sun Gold Farms near Forest Grove. She's been limited to selling her fruit, veggies, and nuts at farmer's markets, or directly to families.

Vicki Hertel: "But as far as reaching caterers and restaurants, schools, and other kitchens, unless we met that at the markets, it was near impossible to make connections, unless we wanted to send one of us out on the streets and knock on doors. And we're too busy farming to be able to do that."

Officials at the Portland-based non-profit, Ecotrust, say the solution to both New Seasons' and Sun Gold Farms' problems is a web site.

Called Food Hub, it basically acts as a match.com, for buyers and sellers. Hertel was one of the first to test out the network. She says it's not technically hard, and it's already yielded some connections – though no sales, so far.

Some participants aren't traditional buyers and sellers. For instance, Ecotrust vice-present, Deborah Kane, noticed an environmental magazine signed on.

Deborah Kane: "Portland Green Parenting just joined as a food buyer."

Kane says Green Parenting runs a co-op, that couldn't find a meat supplier.

Deborah Kane: "And within 90 minutes, they had inquiries from four different cattle producers in eastern Oregon, and they closed the sale."

Local governments, and even utilities, are watching the network develop, too.

Lance Peterson is with the Eugene Water and Electric Board, which is helping subsidize the cost of around 50 memberships.

The water and electric board wants to move farmers away from pesticides – by opening up the natural food market to them.

Lance Peterson: "The more we can create marketplaces for those products, the more encouraged people are for doing more low-impact types of farming."

Grower Vicki Hertel mentioned schools as a market she'd like to penetrate – and parents have long clamored for better food for their kids at school. Farm-to-school is a whole movement of its own, but cost and regulations remain challenges.

Agriculture official, Ann Wright, says the feds have started meeting with school officials, to try and create connections between growers, and growing kids.

URL: <http://news.opb.org/article/6670-food-hub-will-connect-local-farmers-customers/>