

FoodHub in the News



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By Vicki Walker

GUEST VIEWPOINT: Rural communities benefiting from local food movement

Eugene, Oregon – I was glad to see the Oct. 17 Register-Guard article about the FoodHub website, which connects local producers and food processors with buyers in the region. The good work being done by EcoTrust, the nonprofit group that developed FoodHub, is one of many exciting efforts under way to increase opportunities for buying local food and keeping the revenues right here in Oregon.

When it comes to local food, this is a time of great opportunity. It is one of the fastest-growing segments of agriculture, and we expect consumer demand for locally grown food in the United States to increase from \$4 billion in 2002 to \$7 billion by 2012. In addition, we've seen 100 percent growth in direct-to-consumer food marketing sales in the last decade.

During the past few years, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been working quietly behind the scenes to help producers — including specialty crop growers, small farmers and others — to develop and gain access to these profitable markets. In fact, Rural Development, the USDA agency for which I serve as state director, provided grant funding in 2007 and 2009 to support development of the FoodHub website. And just this year, we awarded Ecotrust another \$249,340 to further the reach of this valuable resource across the Northwest. That was one of only four regionally focused grants selected nationwide under the Rural Business Opportunity Grant Program in to 2010 fiscal year.

Also on the food front, USDA Rural Development this year awarded \$1.66 million in value-added producer grants to 10 Oregon producers. Of the funds obligated in states across the nation, Oregon ranked fourth in the number of awards and third in dollars awarded. That funding is helping Oregon growers generate new products, expand market opportunities and increase their income.

Through yet another funding tool, the Rural Business Enterprise Grant Program, we provided small grants to nonprofit groups and communities to support business development in a variety of sectors. The local foods projects we supported include:

The Oregon State University Food Innovation Center's feasibility study of cold-pressed edible oils in the Willamette Valley.

The Umpqua Community Development Corporation's business training for food and land-based entrepreneurs.

Wy'East Resource Conservation and Development's community supported agriculture pilot project for local beef.

The Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians “salmon people” fish marketing project.

A project with Cascade Pacific Resource Conservation and Development to expand local agri-tourism.

The Willamette Farm and Food Coalition’s evaluation of prospects for a local flour mill.

In addition, grant funding from the Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 was directed to both the small farmer incubator project of the Rogue Initiative for a Vital Economy, as well as the Southern Oregon Wine Institute developed by Umpqua Community College.

These and the other projects all are cultivating new business opportunities in the farm and food area. Moreover, they leverage the funding and expertise of a number of terrific partner organizations that are working to help let the Oregon economy grow as well.

These joint investments are money well spent. They have the potential to reap increasing benefits for the state’s agricultural economy in the years to come.

Our support for local foods is just one way we are working to turn rural areas into employment zones and centers for innovation. With more than \$21 billion in Recovery Act funding nationwide and nearly \$422 million in Oregon, USDA Rural Development has made unparalleled investments in economic development, as well as critical infrastructure, in rural America.

In fact, estimates show that Recovery Act funding will have created 300,000 jobs nationwide, with nearly 6,000 of those jobs in Oregon. (More information can be found at www.rurdev.usda.gov.)

In addition to our significant share of the Recovery Act, USDA Rural Development also directed nearly \$500 million in annually allocated funds to infrastructure, community facilities, affordable housing and economic development projects in Oregon’s rural areas and small communities in fiscal year 2010. These efforts are putting Oregonians back to work while making the investments that improve quality of life, promote growth and attract business to rural areas.

As a nearly lifelong resident of small-town Oregon, I have witnessed the decline of once-thriving communities that now struggle to create and retain jobs. In my work, however, I now have the honor of administering programs that support economic development in these areas, and I can attest to the fact that these federal investments provide a critical boost where it is so needed.

While government does not have all the answers, nor should it, we can help provide infrastructure and promote a positive economic climate to help build a brighter future. With policies and programs such as these, USDA Rural Development and the Obama administration are working hard to help Oregon’s rural communities and small towns remain one of the best places in the country to live, work and raise a family.

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