



FoodHub in the News

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FoodHub first anniversary marked by success

Buyer-seller online connections help local agriculture, membership expansion next

If FoodHub, the online marketplace that brings buyers and sellers of local agriculture together, was a college student, its freshman year report card would be full of high grades. But as a sophomore, the classes are more challenging and the goals a bit higher. FoodHub is celebrating its one year anniversary with some bold steps for the immediate future designed to attract more members. Reflecting on the past year, there is reason to feel good about its success at this point.

“FoodHub is capturing the interest of many in the community– both food producers and food buyers,” says Gary Roth of the Oregon Department of Agriculture, administrator of the Agricultural Development and Marketing Division. ODA has helped provide funding for the site. “It continues to grow and result in financially beneficial transactions every day. Our sincere wish is that FoodHub can get more wonderful Oregon products into the hands of consumers locally.”

The FoodHub website is a virtual wholesale experience. Its marketplace feature can be described as a Craigslist of local foods. The site is a work in progress and Ecotrust, the primary organization responsible for its development and maintenance, is poised to make some changes. For the next three months, the \$100 annual membership fee is waived in an effort to build on the nearly 800 users currently active on FoodHub.

“In this first year, we absolutely proved that the business model works and the tool itself works,” says Deborah Kane, vice president of Ecotrust’s Food and Farms Program. “But we have listened to our members this past year on how to make this tool better, and what we heard over and over again was more people, more people, and more people. The membership fee has been a barrier for some people. The best thing we can do right now is open up FoodHub to as many people as possible to gain critical mass and active engagement among members.”

In addition, FoodHub is launching a new category of membership to join the existing buyer and seller categories. The associate category will serve such entities as commodity commissions, trade associations, farmers’ markets, extension offices, non-profits, and service suppliers.

“For example, farmers’ market managers can use FoodHub to find new vendors, commodity commissions can use the connection to educate food buyers about their commodity, feed and seed stores can join FoodHub’s ready-made community of people to locate new customers,” says Kane.

The membership fee waiver and the new category shows FoodHub is adapting and evolving. But even without any changes, the site has been a great tool, as advertised, for many users.

“This past year was about making connections between food buyers and food sellers,” says Kane.

Many of those connections are reflected in a recent FoodHub survey:

- FoodHub users are split basically 50/50 between buyers and sellers.
- Sellers who made connections to new buyers have estimated the total dollar value generated from FoodHub connections to be as much as \$10,000 from new customers.
- There are members in every state of the FoodHub territory – Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Alaska, and California, The biggest concentration is along the I-5 corridor. FoodHub will be making a concerted outreach effort in rural areas this year.
- FoodHub caters to committed local buyers, with 83 percent of buyer respondents describing themselves as "extremely committed to buying locally as much as possible" and 85 percent saying they joined FoodHub "to source more products locally." Another 84 percent of survey respondents say they've become aware of local suppliers they didn't know before thanks to FoodHub.

Schools have emerged as power users of FoodHub. More than 100 school districts representing over 400,000 students are currently FoodHub members. The online tool will obviously play an important role in advancing farm to school efforts in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

This is also the time of year the FoodHub marketplace gets especially active as buyers start to think about their needs for 2011. A look at the online posts shows the active solicitation potentially leading to transactions:

- Hummingbird Wholesale is looking for a farmer who would like to raise Runner Cannelini beans in the 2011 growing seasonal. We would like to contract for about 10 acres. The yield should be between 2,000 and 3,000 lbs/acre if proper attention is paid to weed control, irrigation etc.
- Burgerville is looking for a local supplier for a promotion this summer focused on green beans. Please contact me if you have some thoughts.
- Wahluke School District: We would like to find a regional supplier for Grape tomatoes for our student lunches. We would purchase approx 2-5 cases per week. If you are interested, please contact by email or Food hub message.

FoodHub aspires to be nearly all things to nearly all people in the food world. It offers something to the small acreage farmer who shows up once a week to a farmers’ market as well as giving an opportunity to the larger operator. It can give a local chef a list of ingredient providers as well as provide a large food processor with sources of Northwest-grown products. The key now is to build up the number of members, whether they live in Oregon or neighboring states.

“Our agriculture is regional,” says Kane. “I think it will be very interesting to watch the tool become a regional trading hub as it grows over time.”

For an audio version of this story, please go to:

http://oregon.gov/ODA/news/110202foodhub_audio.shtml