



FoodHub in the News

Food First

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Food Hubs – Localizing food systems?

Food hubs are more than just a farmers' market and they are re-inventing our food systems through localization. Regional food hubs provide the social and physical infrastructure to connect local buyers and sellers and offer facilities for farmers to store and process, market and distribute local food.

Why are regional food hubs springing up around North America right now?

Unlike specialized and industrialized agribusiness farmers, local farmers wear many hats. From planting and raising animals to harvesting and marketing, the local farmer is often faced with more than a full time job. These new regional food hubs can support small-scale, family farming while helping to meet the increasing demand for local food.

In Charlottesville, VA, the Local Food Hub emerged from a noticeable need to assist farmers in marketing and distributing their products. The hub's mission is to "strengthen and secure the future of a healthy regional food supply by providing small local farmers with concrete services that support and advance their economic vitality and promote stewardship of the land."

The Local Food Hub gives farmers direct access to their markets by overcoming prohibitive capital costs. Saving farmers time and money, the hub offers rentable refrigeration and freezer storage, liability and trace-ability coverage, delivery and consolidation services, as well as processing facilities.

In Vancouver, BC, the Local Food First organization is campaigning to build The New City Market, which will similarly centralize and consolidate their local food system. The New City Market will embed the entire local food value chain, not just consumption and production, to allow for value-added activities and distribution strategies.

Most regional food hubs are using technological solutions that bring organization and efficiency to local food projects. Similar to the technology used for online dating programs, food hubs are creating interactive communities that link up local food producers and consumers. The Food Hub, in Portland, OR, is a marketplace and an online directory,

connecting buyers, such as a chef, hotel or buying club; sellers such as a rancher, dairy or brewer; and associates like academic institutions and government agencies.

Internet-based buying clubs aggregate buyers and sellers and simplify local food distribution operations. The Oklahoma Food Co-op has over 3,000 members with their producers meeting every month to fill over 700 orders from buying clubs in the region.

What is the role of regional food hubs? Are they transforming our food systems, or simply a step in the process of re-localizing?

“Interest in food-system localization is a reaction to the destructive, disempowering and alienating effects of large-scale political economic forces,” writes Patricia Allen, the director of the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at UCSC (2010). Against neo-liberalization yet incorporating principles such as entrepreneurialism, regional food hubs are re-inventing food systems through localization. However, localization efforts do not inherently solve environmental and social justice problems. Problems of inequality require critical, social and political analysis and solutions (Allen).

However, local food projects do provide opportunities for critical thinking and “imagining and incubating greater equity in the food system” (Allen).

The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto, ON, Canada exemplifies a local food project building new institutions and infrastructure with explicit social justice goals in mind. The director, Nick Saul, says, “The increased consciousness about food has largely been led by the middle and upper class who have the means to go to the farmers’ market, do community-shared agriculture and make sure they buy the best lean meats, dairy, fruits and vegetables.” The Stop works to provide access to healthy food for everyone in the community. With plans to open more facilities across Canada, The Stop is striving “to influence changes in the policies and subsidies that shape [if,] what and how Canadians eat.”

Regional food hubs, as part of localizing food systems, can contribute to transforming our food systems. In addition to social and environmental benefits, local food projects, like regional food hubs, stimulate local economies by keeping money in the communities they serve. By improving the economic viability of small-scale and family farming, food hubs are re-inventing our food systems and supporting the farmers who wear many hats.

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