



FoodHub in the News

Sustainable Business Oregon

July 12, 2011

By Christina Williams

FoodHub unveils facelift, readies to go national

The Ecotrust online website FoodHub took the wraps off its new design Tuesday, introducing some new functionality to its growing marketplace for the business of food.

The upgrade comes as the site continues to grasp national attention — including from Pres. Barack Obama — and readies for a nationwide expansion sometime next year.

"We're proving the concept on the West Coast," said Deborah Kane, vice president for food and farms at Ecotrust, a nonprofit whose focus includes Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, California and Alaska. "But we need to go national pretty quickly."

Kane was at the White House last week at the invitation of the White House Rural Council and had the chance to brief Pres. Obama on FoodHub during a meet and greet.

"He said, 'That's a great idea,'" Kane said, recounting their exchange.

FoodHub was launched in February 2010 and, out of the gate, was recognized for its innovation as an online tool to connect food buyers — including school districts, restaurants, caterers, grocers and more — with food sellers. Typical marketplace listings involve a farmer with a bumper crop of something ripe and ready trying to find buyers.

FoodHub was built using grant money — \$1.5 million in all — from organizations including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Oregon Department of Agriculture and private foundations including the Meyer Memorial Trust and the Northwest Health Foundation.

"We're working with food businesses of all sizes and shapes," Kane said. "Not just farmers but wineries, brewers, seafood producers, the list goes on."

In February, FoodHub started offering free trial memberships and the numbers of registered users grew quickly from 800 then, to more than 2,200 this week.

But if FoodHub in its original iteration was the Match.com for the food business, the new-and-improved version aims to be part-Facebook, part-Google.

While a basic membership will continue to be free, enhanced memberships allow users to embellish their profiles with photos and videos, buy keyword ads similar to Google AdSense

and add color to their listing on the marketplace, which shows what a food seller has to offer on a particular day.

The new site, which was created for FoodHub by iSite Design of Portland, will also add a buyer and seller feedback tracking system, an advanced searching system that allows for narrower specifics — e.g. which farm can sell me the volume of rhubarb or pork that I need? — and the ability to maintain a contact list within the system and send messages to that group.

The all-the-bells-and-whistles membership costs \$129 annually or \$14.99 per month. Buyers are always free.

"What we started with was a minimally viable product," Kane said. Since then her staff of four full-time and one part-time person has been gathering feedback on what to add.

"There's not a single new feature that didn't come from our membership," she said.

The FoodHub staff has also caught some farmers from Vermont fudging their address to get into the system — one more sign that a nationwide FoodHub is in demand.

If FoodHub's run at a national service is successful, it's next chapter as an organization will start to become clear.

Ecotrust has a track record of spinning out initiatives including ShoreBank Pacific and Ecotrust Forests LLC.

"I think we'll start having those conversations during the fourth quarter of this year," Kane said. "Will we be a mission-driven for-profit? A nonprofit with a business plan? These are questions that Ecostrust loves asking."

Author Contact Info: christinawilliams@bizjournals.com

URL: <http://sustainablebusinessoregon.com/articles/2011/07/slideshow-foodhub-in-action.html>