



# FoodHub in the News

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### **Online FoodHub Creates Community Centered Around Food**

In every industry, businesses look for new ways to connect – to the consumer, to the product, to each other. Sustainable agriculture, in particular, is an industry known for its connections: between the farmer and the soil, the consumer and his food, and the consumer and the producer of his food. But one connection that's often overlooked is one of the most vital to the marketplace – that between the producer and the buyer. That's where FoodHub comes in.

Developed by Ecotrust as part of their Food & Farms program, FoodHub is an online community of food professionals. It allows chefs, grocers and foodservice professionals to connect with and source from local farmers and food producers.

#### **A Hub for Food(ies)**

Ecotrust's mission is to "inspire fresh thinking that creates economic opportunity, social equity and environmental well-being." Under its Food & Farms program, Ecotrust publishes Edible Portland magazine, works with schools to help them source local foods for their cafeterias, advocates for policy changes that support increased food literacy in schools, and runs FoodHub.

The seed that would later become FoodHub was planted about ten years ago, though no one knew it at the time. Since 2001, Ecotrust has partnered with the Portland Chefs Collaborative, and has contributed a print directory of their annual conference attendees so that they could keep in touch after the event. Over the years, the directory grew to be about two inches thick, and Ecotrust realized that maybe it was time to take the directory online. FoodHub was launched in February 2010 as a replacement to that guide.

Part of the reason FoodHub fits so well under the Ecotrust umbrella is because of Ecotrust's focus on the entrepreneurial and business side of things. "We want to create viable businesses that make the world a better place," explains Deborah Kane, founder of FoodHub and vice president of Ecotrust's Food & Farms program.

One big problem facing buyers and retailers who want to support local farmers is knowing how and where to find them. Many smaller producers aren't that visible, and it can be difficult to know who is out there.

“Who’s out there in the first place is issue number one,” says Kane. “We hear a lot of wholesale food buyers who want to buy local products but can only maintain so many individual relationships at a time. It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack...We don’t want to have them continually frustrated and walk away from the local food process.”

FoodHub was created to make that search and discovery process more streamlined and efficient. FoodHub also maintains the transparency so cherished in the sustainable food movement. When people join FoodHub, they run through a series of checkboxes, so buyers (and sellers) know exactly what they’re getting, and from whom and where. Producers can also gain visibility into what the market will demand in the future by seeing what types of contracts are available six or nine months ahead of time.

And FoodHub is already making valuable contributions in terms of marketplace data. Explains Kane, “The tool is able to aggregate good data on the regional food economy. We now have 16 months of data on what were the most searched for items in the marketplace. We’ve got better data than most state agencies. The data mining opportunity is tremendous.”

Products for sale in the FoodHub Marketplace

### **Business is Booming**

Since its introduction, FoodHub has done remarkably well. “There were probably 600 [people] in the print directory and there are just under 2,500 people on FoodHub, and that number is growing exponentially. It’s taking off,” says Kane.

Recent revamps to the site have added to that boom. In response to user suggestions, FoodHub did a major upgrade in mid-July, including creating a tiered membership system, enhancing member profiles and adding advanced search functions. They’ve also created advertising opportunities, and added sponsored content and seller-sponsored search terms.

The biggest challenge FoodHub is facing now is their lack of reach, as they’re currently only operate in six states: California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana and Alaska. Kane says she hopes FoodHub will go national and that at that point, it’s likely they would also open up parts of the site to the public. There are currently some resources for individual consumers, but most of the site is only accessible by members, which means that one must be a commercial buyer, independent producer, regional distributor, industry supplier, farmers’ market manager, trade association or nonprofit to be part of the FoodHub community.

### **What the Future Holds**

Kane has high hopes for the future. When asked where, ideally, FoodHub would be in five years, she promptly responded, “We’d be the Facebook of local food. It wouldn’t be possible to be in the regional food sector without being on FoodHub.”

A leading sustainable food visionary, Kane attributes her dedication to sustainable food to the way she was raised. “My mother had a beautiful garden, a huge backyard garden. [She] was a great cook. We never ate things out of season; everything was made from scratch. I

think I took that for granted,” explains Kane. “I had to eventually leave the nest, and I realized that wasn’t the case for everybody. Most of my peer group didn’t understand. They really had no familiarity with food production, let alone seasonality.”

On a trip to Costa Rica, Kane ended up spending some time in an agricultural town whose community came together around a vibrant farmers’ market. “I think that really reinforced for me the role that food plays in community life,” says Kane. “When I came back to the U.S., I was interested in really replicating that.” Though in a different form, that’s essentially what she’s done with FoodHub – created a community centered around food.

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