

Growing the community food system through annual Food Summit outreach

AT A GLANCE

Education and outreach through an annual food summit is raising awareness and action of citizens to strengthen the health and vibrancy of the Palouse-Clearwater Food System.

The Situation

Demand for locally produced food is increasing in the Palouse-Clearwater region of Northern Idaho, as well as in many other communities in the state, region and nationally. The number of Idaho farmers' markets has doubled over the past ten years. The number of Idaho farm operations with direct-to-consumer sales increased from 1,632 to 2,420 between 2002 and 2012. Restaurants, retail stores, schools, and institutions are responding to that interest and new markets are developing for local produce.

While the interest in local food increases, many farmers selling to local markets struggle to make ends meet. Many community members go hungry or have limited access to fresh, healthy foods. Food banks are often stocked but the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables is minimal.

Meeting demand, improving access and providing a more secure supply will require increased local food production and new marketing opportunities. However, our work with producers who sell to local markets has revealed numerous barriers for growing our regional food system capacity.

Climate limitations for year round production, scarce water resources, and adequate processing, storage, and distribution channels are just some of the challenges. Developing economically viable local food systems is complex and the issues are not easily resolved. Building a strong community food system is



Food Summit participants plan "next steps" for priority issues in afternoon discussion sessions. Photo by Amanda Snyder

beyond the educational efforts of UI Extension; community involvement is key to addressing these multi-faceted issues.

Due to an engaged citizenry, communities in the Palouse-Clearwater region are eager to learn about their food system, helping to identify the barriers to getting more local food and finding solutions. Providing a mechanism for citizens to make a connection to local food activity will strengthen their understanding and willingness to take action.

Our Response

The Palouse-Clearwater Food Coalition (PCFC) is a group of partner organizations in the northcentral panhandle of Idaho and adjacent Washington counties who meet monthly to discuss community food issues. University of Idaho Extension faculty and staff have been key leaders of the coalition since its formation. Coalition members propose and conduct

joint projects, plan events and develop information to educate and inform our community about promising projects, ongoing research and implementation of successful strategies to develop our local food system.

One of the PCFC's most noteworthy events is the annual Palouse-Clearwater Food Summit. The Food Summits provide a venue to gather community members, non-profits, city and county leaders and food and farming businesses to address needs affecting our local food system. Sharing information and resources helps to develop partnerships and a collaborative approach to food system work.

The first two food summits were held in Moscow in November of 2012 and January of 2013 and were attended by approximately 50 people. Speakers shared their work on research and feasibility studies in livestock processing, food processing and food hub related projects in our region. In January of 2014, the Food Summit was reformatted to a whole day event featuring a series of nineteen 5-10 minute presentations with an afternoon resource fair. Presentations included local farmers and food entrepreneurs, farm to school projects and food system work taking place on the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation. Approximately 80 people attended this event.

The Palouse-Clearwater Food Summit in January of 2015 had a focused theme and a keynote speaker from outside of our area. Carol Peppe Hewitt, author of *Financing Our Foodshed: Growing Local Food with Slow Money*, shared her experiences helping to fund food and farming businesses. Carol's participation generated a lot of interest and attendance was at 120 with many attending from around the region including residents of the Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservations. The summit also featured twelve 5-minute talks by local food and farm businesses, those involved in regional food hub efforts and non-profits who help in food access.

Program Outcomes

The momentum of our Palouse-Clearwater Food Summits has grown every year. More than twice the number of people attended the Food Summit in 2015 than in 2013. Participants are learning what is currently happening in our regional food system and are more likely to get involved. Ninety-five percent of participants of the 2015 Food Summit indicated their knowledge increased on food and farming activities. Eighty percent indicated they made a valuable connection with a resource person, 97% said they will continue to work on food related projects and 94% will commit to be involved in a food coalition in their region.

Impacts related to our food summit efforts include increased commitment, collaboration and new projects and programming. Attendance at our monthly food coalition meetings has

increased significantly since the inception of the food summits. The collaborative energy among partners of the food coalition has expanded into planning for several other events. Last year partners hosted the first Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food event on the night before the Food Summit as a way to introduce local farmers to the broader community. Over 130 people attended and we are currently planning another event for 2016. Several coalition partners formed Camas Community Lending Network as a mechanism for encouraging local lending of food and farming businesses.

The Future

Food Summit 2016 - *Feeding Ourselves: Collaborations for Increasing Local Food Access* will be held in January in Pullman, WA. The theme was selected as one of the priority topics named by participants of the 2015 food summit. The move to Pullman was strategic: we want to reflect the regional nature of food systems and our collaborative efforts by engaging partnering communities. UI Extension faculty will continue to utilize the food summit to conduct collaborative education and outreach, and to identify pressing educational and program needs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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