
EDIBLE ENDEAVORS

A Coalition on a Mission: The Northeast Iowa Food & Farm Coalition

It all started with a question so simple it was almost embarrassing to consider: “Why,” asked economist Ken Meter, “don’t we grow our own foods here in the American heartland?”

Formed in spring 2006, the Northeast Iowa Food & Farm Coalition (NIFF) brings together food consumers, businesspeople, state and county agents, and farmers of all stripes to address the fact that most of the food purchased in the five farm-rich counties of Winneshiek, Allamakee, Howard, Clayton and Fayette in Northeast Iowa to tackle that question.

Through monthly meetings and year-round community-based initiatives, NIFF advances three goals: To provide opportunity for existing and new local producers to diversify; To explore development of regional processing and storage facilities to add value to all agricultural products in the area; And to increase sale and consumption of locally grown food on local, regional, and national levels.

In spring 2007, NIFF will release the findings of an institutional food survey and complete a survey of household food-buying practices and beliefs in Northeast Iowa. A GPS survey of food-processing infrastructure—distribution centers, lockers, packaging plants—will unfold as soon as the weather warms this summer.

The goal is to correlate new data on where food is produced, processed, and consumed, with hope of making more local intersections obvious. This system will be integral to NIFF’s multi-year initiative to better link local food and fitness in northeast Iowa.

The idea attracted the attention of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and became the core of a \$500,000 grant proposal submitted by NIFF in early 2007. Proposed programming will build collaboration among schools, hospitals, public health agencies, local businesses, consumers, and, of course, food producers.

Five planning teams (one in each county) are meeting

this spring to identify and act on ways to create community environments that support healthy children, youth, and families by making available and promoting the procurement and consumption of local healthy food and the creation of space and structures for physical activity and play.

NIFF’s plucky approach, and its ability to spur discussion and action, has received support from organizations as diverse as the county cattlemen’s associations and Buy Fresh Buy Local. “Diversity and collaboration are our strengths,” says Brenda Ranum, NIFF co-chair. “It’s not about the money; it’s about people from a variety of backgrounds feeling they can engage each other to discuss what’s going on in our communities, come up with common goals and solutions, and plan confidently for our future.”

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For a complete list of NIFF collaborators, visit www.extension.IA-State.edu/allamakee/info/local+food.htm



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