

NCW Regional Food Coalition
Wednesday, September 15, 2010
10am to 1pm
Okanogan Conservation District Conference Room

Participants: Joan Qazi, Kristi Roberts, Nancy Warner, Carey Hunter, Sam Bartling, Laura Clark, Vicky Welch, Jeff Prentice, Maureen Sheimo, Cheryl Dawes

Laura Clark, facilitator

Nancy provided a recap of the last meeting in Twisp: The Group worked to develop strategic direction because we need tangible things to focus on to make headway. Amy Stork led the group through a process of prioritization. We listed topic areas that the Food Coalition would work on, specifically:

- production/distribution
- promotion /education
- policy development

Each of those topic areas has several bullet points (see notes from June 10 meeting) except networking, which is another overriding function of the Food Coalition. We didn't list any bullet points for networking. However, when we did our ranking networking came out as the number one function of a food coalition.

At the June meeting we also began a good conversation, which we need to continue, that revolves around answering the question: Do we want the Food Coalition to just be an amalgamation of organizations that is a behind the scenes group that supports and puts out common shared priorities and a common shared strong voice for policy and education programs and grants when we're going for something? Or, do we want to actually brand it? It seems clear that we want to brand the region but we're not sure that we want to brand the Food Coalition at the same time.

At the end of the June meeting we formed subcommittees: networking, education, distribution, and policy. We designated a lead for each of the subcommittees. The subcommittees were to meet between June and now and come back to this meeting with a priority to present to the group for rolling up into a shared plan.

We also talked about how desirable it would be to have a one-pager on the Food Coalition that we could use to introduce people just joining the conversation and with the various organizations that we want to have be part of the coalition.

Laura invited Jeff Prentice to present a brief vision of his activities. Jeff explained his interest in working with backyard growers and churches in setting up a trade and barter system for locally-grown food.

Subcommittee Reports:

Promotion/Education – Nancy

Nancy will distribute detailed notes from the subcommittee meeting which included Nancy, Joan, Amy Stork, Maureen, Laura, and Cheryl.

The committee came up with action items:

To provide the basis for making some good solid next steps, the first step is to take a look at the current picture. We need a fundamental inventory of who is doing what related to promotion and education of local foods. With a comprehensive look at who is doing what in our region, we could make good decisions about how to use our limited time and resources. We could prevent “re-inventing” the wheel, if we reached out to 10 or 12 organizations to find out what they are already doing. We can take that step without securing any funding, by using an informal email survey. We can compile a list of organizations or groups, prioritize the list to identify which groups to survey/interview, take the information we collect and roll it up to understand how locally grown food is being promoted.

The second step is to summarize what we learn. We have several tools in the bag already. One of them happens to be newspaper columns. Joan and Amy Stork both write newspaper columns on a regular basis. There may be a regular column on food in the Omak Chronicle. We thought that it would be effective to have a team of writers coordinating and delivering the same messages. Another dissemination tool could be calendars. For example, EAT produces a calendar that could easily be a regional calendar instead of just a Wenatchee Valley calendar. Directories are another tool. Okanogan has a directory and EAT has a directory for the Wenatchee food shed. There could be a regional directory where the parts closest to home could be “clipped.”

Another action item that Amy Stork offered is to put together a survey that would help us to develop five core messages that the Food Coalition could use whenever we're talking about local food. Do we want to talk about self-reliance? Do we want to talk about health? Do we want to emphasize energy savings? What do we want to say all around the region about food? Developing five core messages would be an excellent first product of a Food Coalition.

Joan pointed out that with the first step would be to put together the directory of which groups are involved in food education and they would be the people who would be surveyed in particular, because they are the ones who are already giving a message. Then the work would be how can we make that message a more common, united message that gives the sense that we are a region drawing from a food shed.

The education committee consensus was that if we had five things that everybody agreed on, it would help reduce confusion in the general public and clarify why individuals might want to care about this issue and take action. We don't see going after resources until we have some core messages defined. We would go after funding when we are ready to develop some tools such as posters or calendars using those core messages.

Distribution – Laura

Carey, Nancy, Sherry Schneider, and Laura

The committee focused on distribution and decided to develop a list of who is doing distribution now. The group recognized the need to be consistent in what we are asking in order to get a clear picture of what is currently happening. So Carey and Sherri will develop a set of questions to bring back to the group to solidify the list of questions that we want to ask every single person we contact.

The committee discussed the need for small producers to find a cost-effective method for transporting their products around the region. It may be possible to get producers together with other producers who have trucks with extra room. The committee sees the need for wide distribution of the survey in order to gather the information that could facilitate those connections. Places to distribute surveys include: conservation district newsletters, Farmhouse Table CSA potlucks, Success Summit, “Foodways & Byways” project, the county fairs, Okanogan Feast.

Once distribution information has been pulled together, how will it be disseminated? Will it be a website?

Action items for the committee:

1. Draft the survey and get it back to the group for review.
2. Brainstorm by email about who is already doing some distribution, where production information is captured already and what are the gaps in the information are.

The committee's goal is to gather the information that is already available, determine what information is needed, then develop a scope of work and whether it is necessary to go for grant funds to do more intensive information gathering.

Nancy requested copies of the distribution committee meeting notes to go out with the Food Coalition meeting notes.

Carey noted that the survey questions she had come up with:

1. What do you produce?
2. How often?
3. Where do you deliver?
4. What do you currently use for delivery?
5. What are the costs?

The large group agreed that those are the core questions. Nancy pointed out the need to modify the cost question to: What are the costs associated with each market?

With questions in hand we can get them out at venues such as the Farmhouse CSA potluck and “Some Enchanted Eating.” Also, IRIS is working on the supplement for the

Success Summit which could include a survey form on the back to be clipped out and sent back in.

Discussion ensued about identifying responders and whether they would be willing to share their identities. The group agreed that it would be important to introduce the questions by pointing out that gathering this information will be a benefit for us all by making a more efficient, cost-effective distribution system.

Nancy suggested making it clear that the Food Coalition, a group of partners is working together in the region, is conducting the survey. To facilitate endorsement from the groups that are partnering she suggested developing a one-page general description of the Coalition's mission and strategies.

Laura suggested that the one-pager list the partners and have an invitation to individuals and groups who would like to be members or sponsors of the Coalition.

Joan asked about posting the directory of Coalition members on the IRIS website, clearly stating that this is a coalition of all of these groups located in all of these different places so it is clear that the Coalition is really regional with links to the partner's websites.

Kristi, AmeriCorps volunteer with IRIS, will be able to help with that in her role as Outreach Coordinator for "Foodways & Byways."

Networking – Nancy

A long-standing goal for IRIS has been development of a North Central Washington web portal, one place where everyone can go and have some guidance as to where they can find resources. Sustainable Connections in Whatcom County provides a good model to build on. A large part of their website is a resource directory. But their model doesn't have a portal to the nature of place—the geography, the biodiversity, the cultural history—a lot of the things that IRIS is working on.

Nancy pulled together notes from meetings and conversations about designing a portal that have occurred over the past year around the region to help her put together a draft scope of work for developing a web portal. The scope of work would help us get beyond conversations that end up leading to work that no one has the capacity to take on. A scope would provide a couple of discrete near-term steps we could take. The scope of work Nancy distributed is designed to be a discussion draft towards getting started.

Maureen also distributed a write up that she had independently prepared. She noted that the way the web portal is designed should work equally well for agriculture, energy and transportation with links and an interface that is really useful. We are building a collaborative relationship and building capacity to share more information in a lot of different issue areas with different visions and goals. We want it to be available to citizens to participate at whatever level they want. Citizens, non-profits, public agencies, businesses and unions are all categories that we want collaborating in agriculture and all

the other aspects of what we want to achieve in our community. She emphasized the need to have representation from all those groups in the design committee. Her vision is building a communication system that supports on-line dialog will help us understand how our opinions match up with our visions and our proposals for policies and budgets. With online systems empowering public meetings everywhere, we'll be able to share information at a distance and maybe move toward cycles of planning that incorporate neighborhood to region and encompass the whole system.

Nancy explained that the scope of work she developed was the other end of the spectrum from the long-term vision that Maureen presented. She focused on what we could do in the near-term to get started on building the big vision. The first objective is to put together an advisory group that tells us what they need out of a portal and helps to design a concept. With a concept in hand, we could raise the money needed to get us to the long-term vision by implementing a phased, sustainable plan that would be tangible.

Joan noted that a focus of previous discussions was the desire to use the technology effectively and not recreate something that already exists. We want to create something that will be effective and so well done that people would want to go there first. It would be your one-stop for food, biodiversity, etc.—all of these integrated things that you want to know about your region. This goes along with idea of branding the region instead of branding our coalition because we are a coalition of partners and individuals who are all already using the skills that we all have. We want to leverage those skills in a way that makes something really effective for the end user, so useful that the end user would turn to it rather than all the other possibilities that are out there already. Making sure we do the footwork so it is a really effective site is really important. Maureen's questions in terms of sustainability are questions that need to be asked. Who is going to end up paying for this website over the long-term? How is that going to be done? What kinds of user agreements and operating policies?

Maureen commented that in addition to the type of information events, etc. that is commonly available on websites, we need to make the leap to incorporating a participatory dialog and communication tool. We can start with food and agriculture as the example and make a wide-reaching list of all the people and organizations that should be included—cities, counties, non-profits, businesses, etc. We need really make the effort to fill out that list, send out an integrated mailing with an invitation to participate and follow up with some calls. We need some partners from each of these groups to make it viable.

Nancy pointed out that we have limited capacity. If we take on too much, we won't be successful because we're already stretched so thin. There are two different strategies, the big vision and snowballing our way towards it—eg. the Food Coalition made up of small groups with the notion of building a big tent effort that is open to everybody. But we don't have the capacity to launch a big publicity campaign and do the follow-up associated with that to be credible and to do it really well. So it seems we need to build the momentum as we go.

Maureen suggested that maybe we should build capacity before we start the conversation. She thinks that there are more organizations that could be involved than are currently and that they would bring additional capacity to the table. She wonders about the distinction between who we would invite to the advisory committee and who we want in the coalition. Who should be on the web portal advisory committee versus all of the organizations we talked about earlier today that we will reach out to for input.

Sam commended the usefulness of the overall vision statement and the scope of work that outlines what we can do right now. By sharing meeting notes and making sure the process stays transparent, it will be open to anyone.

Joan reiterated Maureen's point about the importance of making sure that each of the groups that we think are going to be using this website have representation on that committee so that their input can be part of the development of the portal itself. It means that you might have a really large advisory committee, especially because it's regional so we want to make sure that each area is well represented.

Maureen pointed out the difficulty of getting a large group together for a meeting so if we are going to do an outreach campaign—the distribution survey and the education survey—why couldn't we just include the web portal concept in what we are sending out?

Nancy brought up the link between the one-pager with bullets that are the priorities developed by the four committees—networking, policy, education, and distribution. One of the bullets could say: begin working with groups and organizations in North Central Washington to design a web portal.

A portal would not eclipse any of the great work and websites that are already out there - a portal would enhance the connections between those pieces. To do it well, we need a map of how to build the portal. We can still move ahead with developing the pieces, such as expanding the directory for the regional food education groups. That can be on the IRIS website, which will ultimately have a presence on the portal. Another example is Community Farm Connection which is developing a more expanded web-based farm to table directory.

For the portal we might be able to get some in-kind design services but we will probably need to get some money so we need to be clear on exactly what we want a web designer to do. That clarity is a big product. If we could build a community of web-savvy people that could help us, we could begin taking some steps.

Sam asked if the portal could be similar to a Craig's List platform.

Discussion ensued about the ease of using such a platform, the different types of information categories it includes, along with its search capability.

Jeff commented on a large complicated website that he has visited with too much information. He found it overwhelming and off putting.

Vicky said that she liked the idea of a Craig's List approach because the most important thing to her is to have it be user-friendly. You can find what you want to find fast.

Jeff likes Craig's List for buying and selling however he has noted that many of posts have no one participating.

Carey brought up a website in Okanogan that had tremendous potential but was underutilized.

Nancy mentioned Stone Soup which invested a large amount of money for website features that now cost much less because of changes in technology. It would be good for us to have a map of how the parts will come together, knowing that the technology is going to change.

Joan pointed out that to be sustainable it is necessary to have a manager who is committed to keeping on top of the website and updating constantly. A website isn't effective if it isn't current. It's important to keep in mind in the long-term that funding will be necessary to pay someone as their job to keep things updated.

Laura noted that she likes seeing something on a website that indicates when it was last updated so she knows how current the information is.

Nancy commented that having funding to hire a person would have to be an integral part of the design of the portal. If we were to hire a contractor to help with designing the portal, we would ask the contractor to look at existing examples and how they have been designed to be sustainable.

Joan noted the difference between keeping a portal updated and keeping updated all the websites to which the portal leads.

Nancy explained that every organization would maintain the management of their own website and that the function of the portal is to help make those connections happen more easily.

Carey noted that Facebook sends a weekly update and reminder. The automatic reminder works well.

Maureen suggested that we need at least one meeting of the portal advisory group before putting out a scope of work.

The group agreed. The portal advisory group would develop the scope of work. The first step is to put together a team that includes people with technical know-how to design a scope of work.

Policy – Maureen

The committee did not convene. Maureen raised the question whether the coalition is set on addressing a policy issue right now, given our limited capacity.

Vicky explained that Okanogan County is redoing their comprehensive plan now and dealing with agricultural resources, ag zoning, and the right to farm ordinance as part of the planning process. The process has a huge impact on food production capacity in the county but it is probably more than we as a group can handle now.

Laura noted that there are many issues to discuss but that will probably happen a little further down the road when we have a little more activity going and even have the website so we can exchange ideas.

Nancy pointed out that getting our respective boards to endorse the Food Coalition falls under policy. If we have our one-pager with our mission, vision and near-term actions we can take it to our groups. The one-pager is a good product for the coalition's first year and keeps us moving forward with policy.

Joan said that such a one-pager is ideal to take to planning commissions and others and show that there is a region-wide group of people interested in these issues.

Laura noted that sign-on letters would be a good practice if the Food Coalition takes a position on an issue or policy that is different from the position taken by some of the groups that endorse the Food Coalition. We would draft a letter stating the position and gather signatures from the groups that want to sign on. We wouldn't want to present it as being from the Food Coalition because it wouldn't necessarily represent the opinion of everybody under that umbrella.

Nancy suggested that we change the way we schedule meetings in order to broaden the participation. Instead of setting a specific date for the next meeting, maybe we could establish a pattern. For example, the Food Coalition met the third Thursday of March, June, September, and December.

The group agreed on the pattern which would set the next meeting for December 16, 2010. Keeping with the model of meeting in different locations around the region, we'll meet in East Wenatchee, exact location to be determined. Either Joan Qazi or Sherri Schneider will facilitate.

Joan mentioned that Ellen Gray, Executive Director of the Washington Food and Farming network would like to address the group. She also co-chairs the policy committee for Tilth.

To explore the vision of the Food Coalition the conversation turned to desired outcomes.

Joan said one of her desired outcomes is to be able to gain knowledge of what people are growing in backyard gardens that isn't being captured in the direct ag census data. However we can do it, through churches etc., it is important to capture detailed information that isn't captured in existing type of census collection.

We want to understand the food system as region and have the ability to connect with all of the people involved in that as a region. Wenatchee Valley, Twisp and Okanogan are all connected as a food system or food shed and as a watershed as well. Strengthening our regional food shed in a sense of knowing what is going on and how we can connect together and share our resources and skills and voice in terms of the policy issues that might come out of that.

Carey agrees with need for inventory of what is being grown and she sees another need for assessing the distribution system.

Joan wondered whether distribution is so non-transparent that we would have to pay someone to do the research.

Carey has found a lack of transparency when asking producers how they are getting their products to market. They seem reluctant to share the information.

Laura pointed out that we don't need to know exactly where they're going, we just need to know the general area.

Joan noted that the first question to ask is: Are you interested in cooperating in a distribution system? The group agreed.

Discussion of food distribution solutions in earlier times turned to today's roadblocks arising from limited space availability and liability that stymie regional food distribution.

Joan pointed out that liability issues have changed over time. We need to have a better understanding of the liability and food safety issues involved in today's regulatory environment so having someone from USDA or WSDA come and talk to the group. We need to know from someone who oversees food safety let us know what is possible.

Nancy reiterated the value in setting a regular meeting rhythm. If we have predictable meetings people who work at the policy level will be able to attend. Because we are coordinating as a region they could attend one meeting instead of trying to get together with many different groups.

We also need to complete our mission statement about increasing the amount of food grown and consumed in North Central Washington. We're building on our tradition of self-reliance.

Improve our regional food security within the food shed and the big thing right now is resilience – being more resilient in our local area against catastrophic economic changes and political changes.

Our mission is to increase the amount of food grown and consumed in North Central Washington so we are more resilient and able to adapt to change.

**Next Meeting
Thursday, December 16, 2010
East Wenatchee, location tbd**