



IRIS

Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship

NORTH CENTRAL WASHINGTON REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEM BASELINE ASSESSMENT FINAL REPORT

Submitted to IRIS, July 31, 2009, by Amy Stork, Joan Qazi and Carey Hunter



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March of 2009, the Initiative for Rural Innovation and Stewardship (IRIS) contracted with a team of researchers across the region to conduct a baseline assessment of the regional food system in North Central Washington. The goal of the project was to: “Produce an assessment of the regional food system that will provide IRIS and our partners with information about the direct market sector. This information can be used to build a common vision and inform near and longer term actions across the region from Chelan, Douglas, and Okanogan counties to the Quincy Basin of northern Grant County.”

The researchers conducted a literature review to find examples of successful regional food systems efforts throughout North America; created a directory of organizational and producer efforts to strengthen the North Central Washington regional food system; reviewed data from the National Agriculture Census to extract information specific to the region; and conducted a series of in-person and online surveys with producers.

Each component of the research provided valuable insights intended to help IRIS and its partners build a common strategic vision for strengthening the regional food system in North Central Washington. A few highlights:

- There is no shortage of models of success for us to learn from in North Central Washington. In particular, the examples of work in rural areas without a large population center may provide the most relevant strategies.
- Many of the models that have been successful in other places do exist here in one form or another, and could be expanded. Many partners who are active in other communities have the potential to be more strongly involved in regional food systems work in North Central Washington.
- The region statistically echos the national trend in declining numbers of farms; increasing average age of farmers; and a growing number of farmers who earn their primary living off the farm.
- While the agriculture census data clearly document the decline in acreage of traditional North Central Washington products including orchard fruit and wheat, the breadth of those data obscures more subtle trends in the production of row crops and small scale livestock operations, which may be the most relevant trend in the region at this time.

- Respondents to the interviews and survey highlighted the barriers to starting or expanding farms; the need for cooperative transportation; the potential (and challenge) of expanding the role of grocery stores in selling local products; and the need for consumer education.

From the information collected, the researchers developed a series of recommendations, including:

- Convene a standing coalition of groups working on sustainable food issues in the region and leverage the strengths of IRIS in storytelling, farm linkages and collaboration.
- Strengthen partnerships to address barriers to entry for new producers.
- Position a stronger regional food system as an economic development strategy.
- Develop strategies for creation and funding of programs that would help existing producers expand, and help bring new producers into the marketplace.
- Conduct additional research on innovative ideas.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the project

In March of 2009, the Initiative for Rural Innovation and Stewardship (IRIS) contracted with a team of researchers across the region to conduct a baseline assessment of the regional food system in North Central Washington. The goal of the project was to:

“Produce an assessment of the regional food system that will provide IRIS and our partners with information about the direct market sector. This information can be used to build a common vision and inform near and longer term actions across the region from Chelan, Douglas, and Okanogan counties to the Quincy Basin of northern Grant County.”

This project comes at an exciting time for North Central Washington. Interest in healthful and sustainable foods, rural stewardship and economic security is deepening both nationally and regionally. The market for sustainable food is growing. The public is becoming more aware of the value of local agriculture. Meanwhile the uncertain economic climate has led to increased interest in local resources, job development and food security.

These uncertain times also represent a particular challenge to farmers, processors and consumers. How will our communities maintain access to an adequate supply of healthful, culturally appropriate food for residents? How will we ensure that our farmers, processors and food retailers remain viable?

Partners in the development of a successful, sustainable regional food system need reliable information to develop smart strategies for moving forward. The Regional Food Systems Baseline Assessment is meant to provide a starting point for gathering this information and making strategic decisions.

Process

IRIS and the contractor team developed a set of project objectives that included:

- Working with the NCW Regional Food System Assessment advisory group to gather input on the strategic needs of the region, and using that feedback in the creation of the interview guide and online survey.
- Creating a directory of existing regional food system efforts.
- Conducting a literature review to highlight examples of successful regional food systems work around the country relevant to our region.

- Mining National Agriculture Census statistics to create a numerical portrait of production in North Central Washington.
- Conducting a series of one-on-one interviews with producers, direct marketers, cooperatives and representatives of non-profit groups in the region to get their feedback on regional needs.
- Conducting an online survey of additional producers, direct marketers, cooperatives and representatives of non-profit groups in the region to get their feedback on the regional needs.
- Delivering a final report analyzing the data collected and offering strategic recommendations.

The research team hired to conduct this work included:

Team

CAREY HUNTER

Carey Hunter is co-owner of Pine Stump Farms in Tonasket, has extensive experience in the regional food movement and serves on the Board of Directors for Tilth Producers of Washington. She has participated in research to determine the feasibility of a mobile livestock processing unit for the region, and has conducted extensive survey and interview work in both Spanish and English for the National Agriculture Statistics Service and other groups.

JOAN QAZI, PHD

Joan Qazi, PhD has been involved in food systems research for close to 20 years. Agriculture of North Central Washington was the topic of her doctoral dissertation. Joan teaches about agriculture and food systems and leads EAT, a grassroots advocacy group focused on supporting local agriculture and locally grown food consumption.

AMY STORK

Amy Stork is a consultant who works with non-profit, business and government clients to develop effective research-based marketing, communications, organizational development and fundraising strategies. Her background includes work on hunger, food security and sustainable food issues.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Each component of the research provided valuable insights intended to help IRIS and its partners build a common strategic vision for strengthening the regional food system in North Central Washington.

The literature review gives an overview of the many models of success we can learn from throughout the United States and Canada. The directory of current efforts offers an inventory of what is already happening in the region's direct market sector as well as organized efforts to expand the regional food system. This can help IRIS and its partners identify both strengths and gaps in the organizational and productive capacity of the region. The information gleaned from the National Agricultural Census data paints a broad picture of the region's food production; its lack of specificity in the realm of direct market production and sales points to the need for further documentation in this area. Finally, information provided by producers and other regional partners through in-person interviews and online surveys, offers a nuanced view of the challenges and potential opportunities available for the region.

Literature review

The literature review conducted by researcher Joan Qazi identified several dozen examples of areas where partnerships have been developed towards a concerted effort to strengthen regional food systems. (See *Appendix I*: www.irisncw.org/Programs/Regional-Food-Systems/NCWRegionalFoodAssessmentLiteratureReview.pdf)

In addition to elaborating some of the findings that point to the economic importance of regionalizing the food system, the literature review surfaced a number of strategies various communities have implemented to move in this direction. Some prominent strategies include:

- Consumer education campaigns encouraging local food purchases through advertising, events, directories and other means
- Farm-to-cafeteria programs linking producers to institutional partners
- Farm-to-chef programs linking producers to restaurants
- Programs to improve access to fresh food for low-income people
- Farm-to-farm linkages through cooperative marketing, distribution and processing efforts
- Efforts to strengthen traditional direct market channels such as farmers' markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs

- Agricultural land preservation projects
- Community gardens
- Partnerships with food retailers
- Cooperative farms
- Farmer education
- Capture of food waste for composting

In some cases these activities are occurring at a very hands-on, grassroots level. In other cases policy work is the critical arena for clearing barriers to creative and successful solutions. The literature review also identified four primary institutional models under which the type of efforts listed above are organized and/or funded. These include **food policy councils, networks of non-profits, university-based research centers, and farmers' cooperatives.**

There is no shortage of models of success for us to learn from in North Central Washington. In particular, the examples of work in rural areas without a large population center may provide the most relevant strategies. Several regional efforts that may be most relevant to the strengths and needs of IRIS and North Central Washington are listed below. These examples address some of the prominent issues for our region identified by interviewees in our qualitative research.

WOODBURY COUNTY, IOWA

The Woodbury County government has made a strong commitment to supporting organic and local agriculture as an economic development strategy. (www.woodburyorganics.com). The county hired a director of rural economic development; offered property tax rebates to farmers transitioning to organic agriculture; established a public campaign for healthy lifestyles; and passed a local food purchase policy requiring the county food service to focus on local food. Results: the number of active producers at farmers' markets has doubled in the past two years and sales have increased by 20%.

FARM FOLK/CITY FOLK

Farm Folk/City Folk (www.ffcf.bc.ca) is a program in Vancouver, British Columbia that assists new farmers through a partnership with the Land Conservancy of BC. The Community Farms program creates a multi-functional farm where the land is held in trust as a shared land base and a wide variety of activities take place: food production, environmental education, agricultural mentorship, conservation of natural and cultural heritage, outdoor recreation and co-housing, for example. There are currently more than 20 community farms helping new farmers access affordable land, agricultural expertise and flexible labor pools.

THE WESTERN MONTANA GROWER'S COOPERATIVE

The Western Montana Grower's Cooperative (www.wmgcoop.com) offers a cooperative marketing structure for 28 member farms, and tells farmer stories through website profiles. Farmers deliver their produce to one location from which it is collectively processed and/or distributed. The effort was initially funded by a grant and now generates its operating income by keeping 25% of the sales income and returning 75% to the farmers. If there is excess above operating expenses, farmers vote on how to spend the money.

The literature review also identified common elements needed to generate successful regional food systems efforts. These include a leadership institution or institutions that play an initiating and coordinating role; funding sources; and strong partnerships including governments, non-profit groups and producers.

Directory of regional food efforts in North Central Washington

The contractors compiled a “working directory” of efforts to strengthen the regional food system in North Central Washington. The directory includes organizational efforts through non-profit and government partners; farmers’ markets and CSA ventures; and other innovative production or marketing efforts. The working directory is a starting point, a portrait of one moment in time in the ongoing journey of connecting people in Chelan, Douglas, Okanogan and Northern Grant counties to food grown in the region. (See *Appendix II*: www.irisncw.org/Programs/Regional-Food-Systems/RegionalFoodSystemsDirectory20090526.pdf)

Reading the directory in conjunction with the literature review reveals several interesting points about our region:

- **Many of the models that have been successful in other places do exist here in one form or another, and could be expanded.** Farmers’ markets and CSAs are well represented throughout the IRIS service area. Other projects that may be of particular benefit to producers and consumers exist in isolation but lack replication across the region. For example, OMPA (the Okanogan Market Producers Association) resembles some cooperative farm-to-market models from other communities; but it serves only a very small number of producers in a specific part of the region.
- **Many partners who are active in other communities have the potential to be more strongly involved in regional food systems work in North Central Washington,** including county governments; local economic development councils; institutional partners such as school districts and corrections facilities; and land trusts.

National Agriculture Census data

Our examination of the collection of farm data from 2007 and 2002 National Agricultural Census confirms many of the trends observed by our interviewees. Foremost among them are:

- An overall decline in the number of farm operations in the region
- Decline in acreage of traditional North Central Washington products including orchard fruit and wheat
- An aging farmer population
- A growing number of farmers who earn their primary living away from the farm
- Gender diversity that exceeds the national average but falls short of Washington state trends

The statistics collected by the agricultural census also offer a baseline for measuring the growth in direct market sales, organic practices and other emerging trends from this point forward. The census is conducted every five years; the next one will be in 2012.

However, the limitations of the census data point to a measurement dilemma. The census does not effectively count very small acreages or livestock numbers, and privacy concerns prevent the reporting of some data that are collected. Small acreages and livestock numbers are the levels of operation at which the most change in the region is occurring. Unfortunately, alternative data collection at this level is challenging. Factors such as adequate research funding, comprehensive identification of producers, and producer survey fatigue all affect the likelihood that IRIS or a similar organization can produce an accurate inventory of small scale production.

See *Appendix III* for the full report produced from the Agricultural Census data.

In-person interviews and online survey

Eleven in-person interviews were conducted with an array of producers and other partners. Another ten producers and representatives from partner organizations responded to an online version of our interview questionnaire. The survey research was necessarily limited by the time of year it was conducted, i.e., during the busy growing season, and by the limits of the project budget.

The interview protocol included questions about the interviewee's background in agriculture and his or her perspective on the importance of the regional food system. Each interviewee was also asked more specific questions about the importance of three potential priorities for regional food systems work: diversification of farms, increasing processing capacity in the region, and strengthening direct market channels. For each of these issues we asked for the interviewee's general thoughts

as well as his or her sense of what resources and partners could be of assistance in that arena. Finally, we asked the interviewees for any stories about creative solutions that others could learn from; and whether there were any other issues they thought we should be researching. The online survey asked a shorter series of questions on the same topics. (See *Appendix IV* for the questionnaire.)

Survey respondent background

The in-person respondents included four vegetable producers, three fruit growers, two ranchers, one grain grower/miller and one representative from the Colville Confederated Tribes. Online survey respondents ranged from producers to representatives of government and non-profit agencies working on regional food issues. One respondent was a farmer of Hispanic origin; nine of the respondents were women. Most of the producers we connected with are operating family farms or at least grew up in agriculture.

The respondents generally shared an understanding of the importance of regional food systems – in particular the emotional connection between the farmer and the consumer, the economic development potential of keeping food dollars local, and the nutritional and culinary value of fresh food.

“People can drive by our place and see me out there working and say ‘I got some beef from that person.’ A human connection I suppose.”

-VIC STOKES,
METHOW VALLEY CATTLE RANCHER

In addition, we asked how respondents would define “regional food system.” Most responded with a geographic range that reflected either natural or political geographic boundaries such as the four-county region, or within the viable “food shed.” Others mentioned the cultural elements of a regional food system including access to fresh local food regardless of income.

Supply and demand issues

Although most did not include the Puget Sound area in their definition of the regional food system, many producers interviewed mentioned their connection to customers on the west side. In response to the background questions or at other points in the questionnaire, many of these producers, particularly those outside Chelan County, stressed the importance of access to west side markets for ensuring the viability of their business. These farmers say they need a concentration of educated consumers willing to pay the price premium for farm-direct, sustainably produced goods to make their direct-marketing strategies work.

This dependence on the Seattle marketplace is critical to the survival of producers like Bluebird Grain Farms, Crown S Ranch and Rama Farms, and highlights a dilemma for this region. While supplying west side markets makes these operations viable, they then lack the time, incentive or

product to infuse more local goods into our own region. Each of these producers regularly drives through Wenatchee on the way to Seattle without stopping. One of these producers expressed her conviction that the Wenatchee area is “poised” to have enough demand to sustain more growers—but is not yet there.

On the other hand, many of the other vegetable and fruit producers interviewed are able to sell the majority of their goods through direct market channels here in the region (roadside stands, CSAs and farmers’ markets predominately). For these producers, finding a means to extend the growing season through greenhouses or other mechanisms is paramount to financial sustainability.

“The valley is underserved with farmers growing for local consumption.”

-KIM LANGSTON, FEIL PIONEER ORCHARDS

Diversification

While many of the respondents agreed that diversifying individual farms has economic value for the producer in terms of entering multiple markets and hedging against crop failure, a more dominant response was that individual farms are best served by specializing according to the kind of land and skill set each farmer holds. The need for specialized equipment for different types of production limits the capacity to diversify within one operation. Within a specialty—for example in tree fruits or grains or row crops—it is still beneficial to have a variety of crops.

In particular, interviewees highlighted the need for a larger supply of vegetables from regional producers. Several producers also discussed the value of diversifying farms to include both livestock and crop production to minimize outside inputs and maintain high soil productivity.

Barriers to entry or expansion

Barriers to entry or expansion for producers in the region include access to capital, skills, land and labor.

CAPITAL

Many interviewees stressed the difficulty of securing the capital to launch or expand a farm operation. This issue is connected to the viability of keeping family farms going; it is much more feasible for a new farmer to inherit a farm along with the machines, buildings and other necessities than to start from scratch. Other interviewees pointed out that even for those who already have an ongoing operation, making the leap to the next

“We put on 10 hogs, we need another feeder. It’s not an easy puzzle.”

-LOUIS SUKOVATY, CROWN “S” RANCH

increment can be daunting, particularly because of the investment needed for new equipment. For aspiring farmers, access to capital can be a huge hurdle.

EDUCATION

Respondents suggested that the education needs of farmers range from keeping or reviving the foundation of knowledge needed to be good stewards of the land to entrepreneurship and marketing skills. It is challenging for working farmers to find time for educational opportunities; suggestions included wintertime classes, online resources and mentorship programs linking experienced farmers to new farmers.

ACCESS TO LAND

Farmland in the region is expensive primarily because of its development potential; conservation efforts are needed to keep agricultural land from being developed. Several respondents suggested a move towards long term land leases to allow new farmers to enter the marketplace without the capital needed to buy land.

COOPERATIVE EFFORTS

Respondents suggested cooperative solutions to these issues including shared equipment and cooperative farming. One example of this exists in the region, Solid Rock Community Farm in Chelan. We were unable to secure an interview with a representative from that farm.

Processing needs

At the top of the list for most respondents is the need for local livestock processing facilities and/or a change in the policy related to local livestock inspections. Suggested solutions range from a mobile slaughter unit to cooperative fixed location processing facilities.

More viable and immediate options appear to be available for fruit and vegetable processing. Some respondents suggested a need for cooperative facilities coordinated and funded from outside the producer community. Other respondents suggested that plenty of facilities are available in the region, and entrepreneurial producers will find a way to rent processing facilities to others if it is a viable income-producing venture. The failure of several processing facilities in the region and the underutilization of the Tonasket community kitchen suggest that producers may face barriers other than having access to a certified facility.

“The Community Cultural Center does have such a facility and it isn’t used nearly as much as I was hoping.”

-RIVER JONES,
COMMUNITY CULTURAL CENTER IN TONASKET

Cooperative distribution

Respondents to the in-person and online surveys stressed the difficulty of distributing goods to market from far-flung farms throughout the region. They almost all suggested the institution of one or more cooperative distribution schemes (e.g. a truck that picks up food at many farms and takes it to restaurants, grocery stores or other outlets).

The Okanogan Producers Marketing Association is a strong example of this model, though limited in scope. Respondents suggest the challenges to developing more of these cooperative schemes include keeping the cost low enough for farmers to retain a profit from the goods and changing the prohibition of proxy selling in the farmers' markets.

Market channels

Many of the respondents noted the importance of diversification within individual producer market channels. Having many income streams helps producers spread their risk throughout the system. It also enables them to capture a greater percentage of consumer dollars, for example by providing multiple kinds of fruits, or fruits and vegetables, through the same CSA or farmers' market stand.

Although several respondents suggested the need for year-round facilities where farmers could sell their own goods, most people suggested that a primary growth area is getting supermarkets in the region to buy directly from farmers and to prioritize local food. A barrier to this is convincing produce managers or market owners that demand for local food is strong enough to allow them to pass the price premium for local food on to customers. For the grocer this includes the cost of dealing directly with multiple growers instead of a single produce wholesaler. (An example of a grocery store that has made a priority of working directly with growers is New Seasons Market in the Portland, Oregon area. See literature review for more details, or www.newseasonsmarket.com)

"It would require developing a network to get the volume you need to pay for the cooperative and more."

-JOHN BUTLER, AMERICAN PRODUCE EXPRESS

Additionally, several respondents suggested that cooperative marketing efforts could be beneficial to help raise awareness of the benefits of local food and to alleviate some of the marketing burden on farmers who lack time, skills and/or inclination towards marketing.

Another potential cooperative marketing channel presented by respondents lies in creating collective connections with institutional customers such as schools and nursing homes in order to provide the volume needed by such facilities.

Consumer education

Another near-universal comment from respondents surrounds the need to educate consumers in the region about the value of local food and why it costs more. Several interviewees suggested that consumers in the region are more price-driven, creating a limitation on the demand for locally grown (i.e. more expensive) food. Additionally, the tribal representative interviewed suggested that a value shift around using fresh foods would be necessary to create demand within his community.

“Encourage people to buy our food. It seems expensive to them; they need to change that attitude.”

-EUSTOLIO RUBIO, GROWER, BREWSTER

Broader cultural shifts

Several respondents expressed their view that low oil prices and subsidies for large commodity farms are among the culprits in creating a false consumer perception of the price of food. Many pointed out that broader cultural trends—such as interest in organic food, concern about climate change and the popularity of books like Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma*—have so far facilitated the growth of the local and regional food movement, and that continued changes will further advance these changes.

Resources

Respondents suggested that assistance from various sectors including government, non-profit and the farm community itself would be helpful in developing some of the solutions mentioned above. Suggested government partners include the tribal council and other tribal sources; county governments; Washington Department of Agriculture; Farm Services Agency; the Washington State University direct marketing and small farms teams; health departments; school systems; conservation districts; and the non-profit conservation community. Several suggested that the primary need is for networking to help farmers learn about and access existing resources such as processing facilities available for rent.

Several respondents also called for increased entrepreneurship within the sector, particularly in the processing and distribution arena. The interviewees suggested there is a niche available for commercially viable services in this arena, but no one has stepped into it.

What works?

Several themes of how success is created emerged from the statements and stories of respondents. Primary among them is the need for farmers to tell the story of their food and get people to experience the difference – in taste and emotional resonance – that is embodied in local

food. This educational and personal connection helps move consumers to pay the price premium. Customer demand in turn drives distribution opportunities such as grocery store and restaurant sales.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the responses to the in-person and online surveys that those working to create a sustainable regional food system face many challenges. More heartening indications include the abundance of ideas and enthusiasm put forward by those we contacted; a sense of cultural and economic momentum for the movement; the availability of models of success as documented in the literature review; and the seeds of innovation germinating throughout the region—many of which are listed in the working directory compiled for this project. At this exciting time, the way is open for regional leadership in developing a strategic approach to the issues at hand.

Recommendation 1: Convene a standing coalition of groups working on sustainable food issues in the region.

The goal of this group should be to develop a cohesive strategic plan for strengthening the region's food system with clear objectives and outcomes.

As we examine the models offered by other communities, it is clear that the regions with the most comprehensive approach to strengthening food systems, have developed such a coalition. Relevant examples include the Hartford Food System; Rural Vermont; and Land Link Montana. (See literature review for details.)

In reviewing the responses to the questionnaires and reviewing the directory, no clear leader emerges from among the groups currently working in the region. While many suggestions were developed by respondents, no particular partners or agencies were mentioned often enough to appear to constitute a natural clearinghouse or central resource for farmers.

There is clearly an opportunity for leadership in convening a regional food strategy group, and this is a logical role for IRIS to play given its strength in forming partnerships with diverse stakeholders. In addition, several roles suggest themselves based on the existing strengths of IRIS, which include storytelling, farm linkages, and collaboration.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen institutional partnerships to address barriers to entry for new producers.

Including federal, county and other agencies with economic development, rural development, farmland preservation or other related goals in the strategic planning process can help cultivate partnerships with the potential to provide funding or other practical resources (loans, education, labor etc.) to non-profits or directly to farmers. As one interviewee said, the next phase of research should be to go to the institutional level and listen for the barriers and opportunities from potential

partners – what can partners bring to the table and what are they prioritizing already? How can regional food strategies dovetail with their resources and interests?

Recommendation 3: Position a stronger regional food system as an economic development strategy.

The greatest concern of government at every level today is the creation of jobs and long-term economic development. Food systems work offers clear benefits to farmers, retailers and others involved everywhere along the chain of production. It is also clear that regionally produced food using sustainable practices continues to gain market share nationally and in Washington. Today, nearly every federal and state grant program asks applicants to document the job creation and economic development potential of their projects. It would be beneficial for a North Central Washington regional food strategy group to find ways to document the economic development potential of regionalizing the food system; to prioritize and seek partnerships for those programs which most clearly offer job and business creation opportunities; and to create linkages with existing economic development groups and the assistance they provide.

Recommendation 4: Develop strategies for creation and funding of programs.

Develop strategies for the creation and funding of programs that would help existing producers expand, and help bring new producers into the marketplace. In particular, our research suggests that the following would be most helpful in our region. Please note that the scope of this research did not allow us to draw any conclusions as to the feasibility of enacting particular strategies. Market research with target audiences (producers, consumers, retailers etc) will be imperative before launching any specific programs.

DEVELOPING A COOPERATIVE DISTRIBUTION MODEL FOR GOODS PRODUCED THROUGHOUT THE REGION

The region's diverse and far flung geography and low population density present a hurdle in achieving the "critical mass" necessary for the success of many of the types of activity that have been successful elsewhere. Nearly every one of our respondents at some point mentioned the establishment or expansion of collective transportation that would allow farmers to have a third party take their goods to regional market destinations. These destinations might include retail establishments dedicated exclusively to regional goods; restaurants; institutional cafeterias; and natural and conventional grocery retailers. The distributor itself offers job creation benefits beyond the benefits to farmers in productivity and market access. Though mentioned less frequently, a collective marketing program could be a natural corollary to such a distribution scheme.

LAUNCHING A CONSUMER EDUCATION PROGRAM TO BUILD DEMAND FOR REGIONALLY GROWN FOOD

While nascent “buy local” efforts exist throughout the region, our marketing experience suggests that a more concentrated effort to build demand in the greater Wenatchee area would achieve more bang for the buck than dispersed efforts conducted in each community in the region. With greater population density, higher median income and access to more media resources—including the very supportive Wenatchee World newspaper—Wenatchee presents a logical regional center that can serve as a collector for regionally produced goods, and begin to replace or supplement the need for producers to travel to Seattle to sell their goods. As access to Seattle markets has facilitated the growth and survival of many producers in our region, expanded demand from Wenatchee consumers has the potential to facilitate market entrance or expansion for others. In addition, the existence of fully-formed and functional non-profit groups such as EAT and Community Farm Connection offers the potential leadership necessary to execute such a campaign.

OPENING GROCERY STORE AND INSTITUTIONAL DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS

Grocery stores present a dilemma for regional food producers. It would seem far more convenient and efficient for a farmer to sell his produce to a grocer who then advertises, displays and sells the produce to the customer. However this scenario presents several challenges. First, the farmer then loses the marginal increment of profit—a difference which can be significant for small growers. Second, grocery stores are in many cases no longer set up to interact directly with farmers, having transitioned to a wholesale distribution model within the past several decades. However a focus on cultivating grocery store connections could go hand in hand with creating a regional transportation cooperative. Enthusiastic grocery stores would also be logical partners in a consumer education campaign.

Institutional kitchens present a related set of opportunities and barriers. The scale of food production in school cafeterias, nursing homes and correctional facilities can provide market security to producers who are under contract to provide food to the facilities. This model has been successful in increasing farm capacity in other regions including western Oregon (see literature review for examples). However these cafeterias rely heavily on food distributors such as Sysco and FSA, and have become increasingly oriented away from preparing fresh foods.

OUTREACH AND EDUCATION FOR FARMERS

Our interviews and the literature review suggest that educational opportunities that are structured effectively for producers would be helpful for new farmers and those wishing to expand. Some of these resources are provided by Washington State University and other institutions.

ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO REGIONAL FOOD PRODUCTION

Any number of structural issues may be slowing the development of a stronger regional food system. Land use and development regulations have an obvious impact on producers and can be strongly influenced by active advocacy. Other policy issues brought up in interviews and research include requirements around livestock processing and inspection, and certain transportation restrictions. A cohesive approach to policy priorities by any regional food strategy group would strengthen the voice of the regional food movement in decision making at every level.

Access to land and capital are significant barriers for beginning farmers. A sustainable food group can play a leadership role in exploring innovative options and partnerships with banks, land owners, conservation groups and others to improve access to these basic building blocks.

Recommendation 5: Conduct additional research on innovative ideas.

In addition to the priority areas indicated by the research, less obvious but potentially feasible ideas found in the literature review and from producer input include the sharing of farm equipment; cooperative farming ventures; and leases that link protected agricultural land with people wanting to farm. Also, as our review of National Agriculture Census data revealed, we do not currently have a clear statistical picture at the scale we need to be able to evaluate the existing and potential production, consumption and economic value of agriculture in the region. Further research would be helpful in determining the real potential of these ideas and needs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers would like to thank all who contributed their insights to this project, particularly IRIS, the members of its regional food advisory committee, and those who responded to our requests for interviews or completed our surveys.

As with all projects, the scope of this research was limited by the time and financial resources available to us. Conducting agriculture-related research during the spring and summer months created additional challenges. We wish that we could have gathered insights and comments from the many other critical individual and organizational participants in our regional food system. We also want to acknowledge the great body of work that has been done in the region already. We could not possibly have captured all of the energy, ideas and work that have been generated in pursuit of a stronger regional food system. It is our hope that the findings and recommendations discussed here will serve as the beginning of a larger regional conversation about strengthening the food system that supports the people and land of North Central Washington.