

### Dialogue Brings Rural Grocery Players Together

KSU's Rural Grocery Initiative team convened a Food Distribution Dialogue in Manhattan, Ks. on February 11. The meeting brought together rural grocers, food distribution companies, economic development interests, financial interests, and rural advocates. The Kansas Rural Center (Julie Mettenburg, Cole Cottin and Natalie Fullerton) represented the grower, farmer and rancher voice, along with its long-term interest in local and regional food systems.

Also in the room were funding sources -- Network Kansas, IFF from St. Louis, Dept. of Commerce, Federal Home Loan Bank of Topeka, and rural economic development interests.

Working groups representing each sector met and discussed the main question for the day: how can we increase food distribution to our rural communities? Two key dimensions were addressed:

--If you had to name a key piece or element to making a rural food distribution system work / viable, what would that piece be? and What are the critical barriers preventing food distribution to rural communities?

The top challenges that were identified for our rural groceries included: operating costs; education: owners and consumers; having enough volume: must be profitable, local buying power, get past minimum buying order requirements; needing laws/regulations to support rural; improved networking: coordinate efforts of food buyers/distributors; starting small, simple, smart, efficient, with appropriate capacity: logistics, variety of choice; ideas for competing with Big Box stores; promotion in regional food systems: geographic distances, tying in with local farmers; ideas to deal with owner burn out: help support owner as an issue of capacity; dealing with who's in charge: wholesaler? warehouse? end user?; promoting rural entrepreneurship; assessing community needs; and need for long-term reliable suppliers to help with cost of goods and keeping them competitive.

David Procter, principle investigator and director of K-State's CEDC, then challenged the group by asking: Where do we start, to take the first step? And where can we have the most impact? Groups re-divided by interest, to address the top 5 issues from above:

#### 1. Education strategies

- \*Owner / citizen "grocery schools" support education training;
- \*Networking: peer support, regional network hubs, regional buying;
- \*Youth education: social media, talking about impacts;
- \*Community ad campaigns -- about money turning over, associations that local business support, etc. All retail, buy local;
- \*Need a neutral information provider.

#### 2. Having enough volume:

- \*Create a model of what works: population needed, how are they successful.

- \*Legislative laws, lower taxes;
- \*WIC;
- \*Store owner education;
- \*Regional food system -- must have demand.

### 3. Promote Regional food system.

- \*Explore: tap existing distribution network, get farm goods into it.
- \*Advocate: policies that support rural food system.
- \*Educate: Ag in the middle, identify entrepreneurs

### 4. Laws/ regs to support rural

- \*Taxes, regulations, liquor laws
- \*Action problems: getting legislature engaged, out migration, young people, and food security / crisis, get out ahead of it, Walmart predatory practices
- \*Focus on the need for jobs, where is food needed, and how to get pay and sustain, need 5-10-15 year vision
- \*Need to paint the picture for our legislators, come together as a coalition to have a voice.

### 5. Reduce operating costs

- \*Prison labor to re-package, funded through rebate;
- \*Energy audits;
- \*Energy programs -- REAP, KS Corporation commission, need to promote this info;
- \*Apprentice program
- \*Team up with Box stores

### Toward a New Rural Coalition?

As part of the legislative and policy discussion, participants identified that any real progress toward support for rural communities and their grocers would require a paradigm shift from our legislature, in terms of attention to rural issues.

Thus, participants identified that a rural coalition of interests might be needed to counter influence from other powerful interests.

A "New Rural Coalition" would be a broad-based collection of Kansas citizens, organizations, businesses and communities who seek to advocate for the needs of our rural communities. It would provide a vision for our successful rural communities of the future, around meaningful jobs, rural groceries, health care, green investment, entrepreneurship, education and capital investment, and lead the economic, policy and grassroots activism that will support vibrant rural communities.

We want to know: would you be interested in getting involved with such a coalition? Do you think it's the right direction for rural Kansas and public policy?

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