

Eat Local Foods Coalition: Connecting Nutritionists and Farmers

Final Report for ENE04-084

Project Type: Professional Development Program

Funds awarded in 2004: \$9,973.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2006

Matching Non-Federal Funds: \$5,689.00

Region: Northeast

State: Maine

Project Leader:

[Russell Libby](#)

MOFGA

Project Information

Summary:

This project intended to help nutritionists understand the possibilities that come from helping local farmers to improve the quality and variety of nutrition information they provide to local consumers. 50 Nutrition professionals, predominantly Extension nutrition educators, participated in a full-day workshop in May 2005 entitled "Nutrition Education and Local Food Systems: Making the Connection." The workshop featured presentations from Nutrition Educators, Extension Administrators, chefs, and farmers; and focused on strategies to increase the local foods message in these professionals' work with their respective clientele and strengthen relationships between these groups based on local foods.

Performance Target:

Original Performance Targets:

1) Of the 46 Cooperative Extension nutrition staff, 23 will attend the proposed workshop and 15 will pass on information gleaned from the workshop to their clients, who, in turn, will integrate the information into their daily lives. This performance target addresses the issue of Northeast agriculture "providing healthful products to its customers."

Three of the nine Extension educators who work on nutrition issues, along with their supervisor, attended and actively participated. Unfortunately, we were unable to get the 35 nutrition aides involved in the workshop. Since the educators are the trainers of the aides, any benefits from the workshop are only indirect. If someone were to try this approach again, getting the workshop included as a required in-service training for the aides would be essential.

2) Of the 32 Cooperative Extension agricultural staff, at least 10 will attend the proposed workshop and 5 will pass ideas gleaned from the workshop to their farmer-clients, who, in turn, will improve their farming enterprises, by providing more

nutrition information and recipes to consumers. This performance target addresses the issue of Northeast agriculture being conducted "by farmers hav[ing] a positive influence on their communities."

The director of the agricultural staff, along with one of the agricultural agents, attended and participated. The specialists for Maine agriculture see themselves as production specialists, primarily. We were unable to get them to see nutrition education as an essential part of their daily work. Getting buy-in from production-oriented agents seems to be a continuing issue when the topic of a workshop is focused on marketing or establishing connections with consumers.

Further discussion of achievement of Performance Targets:

As stated above, achieved attendance from Extension Educators – both Nutrition and Agriculture – was somewhat below targets. This was despite the efforts of the workshop organizers to extend personal invitations to executive extension personnel and request that they encourage their employees to attend. It is worth noting, however, that both Lavon Bartel, Director of Extension, and John Rebar, Extension Program Administrator, were in attendance.

It is also significant that while participation from extension personnel was slightly lower than targets, the workshop also attracted nutritionists and educators from NGOs and other government agencies and initiatives, such as Healthy Maine Partnerships and the Maine Nutrition Network. These organizations play an important role as service providers and networkers within the Maine nutrition and agricultural community, and their participation was encouraging. At least 3 representatives from school food services were also in attendance, reflecting a growing interest among institutions in sourcing local foods.

We hoped that roughly half of the workshop participants would then demonstrably incorporate concepts and strategies discussed at the workshop into their work with consumers and farmers. We attempted to ascertain the level to which the Performance Target was achieved with a follow-up survey administered 1 year after the workshop. While the survey response rate was too low (18%) to ascertain whether we achieved the stated target, anecdotal evidence gleaned from survey responses suggests that the majority of participants did in fact use ideas and strategies discussed at the workshop to benefit their work and improve their capacity to promote local foods. We include more discussion of this in the Outcomes section.

Introduction:

see summary

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Educational Approach

Educational approach:

The day-long workshop “Nutrition Education and Local Food Systems: Making the Connection” was held on May 6, 2005 at the headquarters of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association in Unity, Maine. Speakers included:

- Dr. Jennifer Wilkins, Cornell University Nutrition Educator and Kellogg Food and Society Policy Fellow
- Dr. Lavon Bartel, Director, University of Maine Cooperative Extension
- Dr. Mario Teisl, University of Maine economist and food labeling expert
- Cheryl Wixson, chef, educator, and host of the Public Television series “What’s for Suppah?”
- Martha Putnam, Director, Farm Fresh Connection, a local foods broker
- Richard Rudolph of Rippling Waters Farm, a veteran direct marketer

The speakers and the audience of 50 Nutritionists, Nutrition Educators, and Agriculture Educators discussed from various standpoints their approach to strategies for strengthening relationships between local food producers, nutrition service providers, institutions, and consumers; improving nutrition education at farmers markets and other direct-to-consumer venues; and creating organizational partnerships and initiatives between nutrition educators and local food advocates. Participants were also fed lunch consisting of entirely locally produced food, as a subtle example that it was possible to produce a tasty, diverse and nutritious meal with local ingredients, even in early May in Maine.

Milestones

Milestone #1

Accomplishments:

Publications

see discussion in outcomes and impacts

Performance Target Outcomes

Performance target outcome for service providers narrative:

Outcomes

Original stated Milestones:

- 1) At least 23 of the 46 Cooperative Extension nutrition educators, at least 10 of 32 Cooperative Extension agricultural educators, and other non-Extension nutrition educators will attend a one-day workshop to discuss ways to make connections with farmers on the basis of nutrition.
- 2) At least 15 of 23 nutrition educators will provide clients and contacts with improved information on how to connect with local farmers and why it is beneficial for them to do so.
- 3) At least 5 of 10 agricultural educators will give farmers nutrition information and recipes they can integrate into their marketing programs, with examples of how other farmers are doing this successfully elsewhere.

Accomplishment of stated milestones:

As discussed above, workshop organizers attempted to gauge the impact of the workshop on participants' capacity to more effectively promote and source local foods in their work through a follow-up survey. While the survey had a fairly low response rate, we were able to gain an anecdotal picture of the workshop's impact.

Of 45 surveys mailed, 8 were returned (a response rate of 18%). 6 of 8 (75%) respondents rated the workshop "excellent, 1 "good," and 1 "fair." 6 of 8 indicated that the workshop has "positively influenced (their) work in the past year." When asked to elaborate, selections from survey responses included:

" Since the conference (my organization) has:

- β Developed a handout listing local foods available at supermarkets;
- β Helped to update a local foods sourcebook for Franklin County;
- β Helped with a local meals program for community health majors at the University that uses local foods;
- β Contributes a column to the local newspaper that promotes local food."

"The information at the workshop helped our program (WIC) to more effectively promote our clients' use of Farmers Markets."

"As Director of School Nutrition, I have worked with more school districts to feature local foods. Some of these connections were made at this workshop."

"I loved Jennifer Wilkins discussion of local food as Food Security. She was an outstanding speaker. Lunch was outstanding as well, and a great example of what is possible."

"I enjoyed meeting and hearing from farmers -- they are a very committed

bunch. The workshop gave us some good ideas for promoting farmers markets through the internet. We went on to develop an idea for promoting and distributing (WIC) food vouchers to be redeemed at FMs on the web.”

While the follow-up survey was not able to ascertain whether the workshop accomplished the exact milestones that were articulated in the original proposal (other than simple attendance at the workshop), extrapolation from survey responses indicates that the workshop was substantially effective in its objectives of educating nutrition and agricultural educators about strategies for improving markets for and access to local foods, and fostering connections between and among service providers and their clientele.

Additional Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

see discussion in outcomes and impacts

Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

Potential Contributions

As the survey responses demonstrate, the workshop was effective in its objective of initiating a discussion, facilitating networking, and furnishing strategies for increasing Maine nutrition professionals' clienteles' access to local and nutritious whole foods. The workshop strengthened existing connections between service providers and formed new connections. Much of the information and awareness work initiated at the workshop continues to be carried out by the Eat Local Foods Coalition, a partner in this SARE PDP grant.

Future Recommendations

As discussed above, we realize that in order to achieve the greatest degree of participation in an event like this, it needs to be integrated into (preferably mandatory) continuing education programming for Extension personnel and nutrition experts (e.g., dietitians). Even with strong support from Extension leaders we had to work hard to get buy-in from program level people.

Even more important is to continue making this information available and accessible in forms that farmers and others can distribute. For many consumers farmers are the first line of contact, and they often don't feel that they have access to information that they can distribute in usable form. Nutrition information and recipes that can be duplicated or posted easily are a key part of the gap between farmer and consumer, and we continue to look for ways to make that more accessible.

Since the workshop the Eat Local Foods Coalition has partnered with the Maine Nutrition Network to put recipes into community newspapers and other forums that are accessible to the general public. We are also working to put this material in a form that works for farmers in their marketing work. More follow-up activities such as this should have been an explicit goal and activity of the project.

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