

Building a Local Food Cooperative Through an Interactive Website

Final Report for FW09-040

Project Type: Farmer/Rancher

Funds awarded in 2009: \$15,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2010

Region: Western

State: Oregon

Principal Investigator:

[Sarahlee Lawrence](#)

Rainshadow Organics

Project Information

Abstract:

Over the past year we have created a virtual, interactive food cooperative website that has connected small local farmers and ranchers with the consumers of Central Oregon. It has enabled our community to build a local food economy with a central place for information, products and events. This website is a place where growers can post their products as they become available. It has enabled farmers and ranchers to better meet volume needs for grocery stores and restaurants. The website also provides a discussion forum for farmers to exchange information about crops and experiments; pool resources such as bulk purchase of seeds and organic fertilizers to reduce input costs; a directory for harvest days, farmers market, seasonal products and supportive restaurants and stores; and postings of events, workshops, news, instructional videos, photo galleries, classifieds and other useful links.

Project Objectives:

An objective of this project was to form a virtual cooperative to bridge the gap between producers and consumers in Central Oregon.

Secondly, we aimed to make a place where local producers could pool their resources to meet local demands.

Lastly, we worked to create a viable system of information exchange.

Cooperators

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Research

Materials and methods:

In fall 2009, we began to gather the information for the website. This was a long process of meetings with producers, both one-on-one and in groups. We really wanted to make a website that people would use, so we worked hard to make a comprehensive list of all the components that the website could include. Winter was a good time for this, since farmers were not as busy and could spare time to brainstorm.

After gathering a lot of input, we began building the website. We built several pages and gathered photos and designed the layout. In the spring, we had a rough draft of the site and we gathered the farmers together to get some final input. After moving some things around and editing the site, we were ready to share it with the greater community.

Research results and discussion:

During May, we prepared for our launch party on June 5. We got some radio interviews and ads. We made posters and magnets and worked hard to generate some buzz for the site and the launch party.

On June 5, we had quite the turnout at our local environmental center. All of our small, mostly organic, farmer group was present with their wares. We had lots of food donated from local restaurants, most of which was made from locally-grown products. OSU had a booth and the Master Food Preservers, as well as our WestonPrice chapter and Locavore group. We had the website up on a big screen and people could sit down and try it out. It was wonderful to have so much participation and to know that I actually created something that our farming community was behind. And then to have lots of consumers coming through to check it out was very rewarding. To connect all these people was the goal and to see it in the flesh was fabulous.

Since the launch, we have been working to use the site and continue to let the community know about it. OSU continues to put it in their newsletters, and I mention

it every time I am in the paper or on the news. Most of the changeable aspects of the website, such as event postings and product available, are through a forum page which makes the site very interactive and easy to keep up to date. Dana Martin posts lots of information, and producers and restaurants are learning how to incorporate it into their work. As a farmer, I have a bit less time than I had hoped to update the page in terms of feature articles and pictures, so we are looking for someone in the community that would like to do that.

I have been doing lots of experimenting this summer, including a SARE research project intercropping wheat and clovers. I will be putting all that information on the website this winter. I do so many research projects with vermiculture, organic systems, composting and other sustainable agriculture practices, I just need the winter to write them up and get them on the website. If we just had someone during the summer who could update the site, we would be fine. That is in the works for next season. And for now, summer is almost over, and I am very excited to add a lot of information to the website.

Participation Summary

Educational & Outreach Activities

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

The project itself is the outreach in our case.

Our website: www.centraloregonfoodnetwork.com

I will include newspaper articles at the end.

Our launch party was on June 5 at the environment center in Bend, and there were about 100 people there. We also had our farmer group meeting at the end of the party to get people excited about using the website and also to teach them all the tools and opportunities that the website provides.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

One of the best things that happened from the development of this site is the coalition of small local farmers that get together about four times per year. It all started because of the website, and it has been wonderful to find each other, get to know each other and start to build a real community among the farmers. The alignment of these farmers is a real benefit to family farms and our rural communities, because I think more and more small farms will see that it is possible to stay in farming and that there is a support network in our area. Our society as a whole needs to have more small farms as well as access to those farms. This website is just for our small region, but it is a model that can be applied all over the United States.

Every practice used and published on the cooperative website will be focused on learning the regional, economic, social and environmental implications of

sustainable agriculture and sharing those lessons with farmers, ranchers and the public. This is a social network which farmers can use to reach out to citizens and help them understand what it means to eat locally and seasonally and the importance of preserving sustainable small farms in Central Oregon.

Recommendations:

Potential Contributions

Our local producers are learning to use the website. Not that it is difficult, but online marketing is new to many farmers. The community is hungry for it, and producers are finding time to post their products. I am sure the use of the site will grow over time as more and more people know about it and use it.

I also got our farming community together through the website to buy seed potatoes and row covers earlier in the year. Pooling our orders enabled us to get a discount on these items and that was one objective of the site.

Almost all of our producers have been listed on the site, and more people write to me to get on the directory. Farmers have also gotten direct calls and emails from consumers who have found them on the website.

Reactions from Producers

Jim from North Fork Ranch said, "The gathering was important. Thumbs up!" And this has been the general consensus from our farmers.

Sean Dodson from Dancing Cow Farm says, "We're hoping that this creates a marketing structure that allows the farmer to focus on what he's good at, making good food, and then the website can focus a little more on getting that food to the people. We all tend to be on several different lists, but we didn't really have anything going that was Central Oregon-specific. The idea is to really focus on Central Oregon and the issues that we have in Central Oregon and get the product to people who want it as well as to hopefully collaborate as farmers."

Future Recommendations

I would really recommend the process of collaborating farmers in any community. The website was a great reason to do it, and we now have a means for working together and keeping in touch and a tool that links us to the community. I think that the grant was well spent and of great benefit to us. I must extend great thanks to Western SARE for funding this project. It has been rewarding to work on and a great and needed addition to our community.

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This site is maintained by SARE Outreach for the SARE program and is based upon work supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under award No. 2019-38640-29881. SARE Outreach operates under cooperative agreements with the University of Maryland to develop and disseminate information about sustainable agriculture. [USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.](https://www.usda.gov/eo-12958)

