

PUGET SOUND FOOD PROJECT

PROGRESS REPORT

22 October 2007

Summary of Current Findings

A series of 10 meetings with stakeholders representing the 12 Puget Sound counties included in the project area have been scheduled. As of the date of this report, five of the meetings have been held with the remainder to be completed no later than October 31, 2007.

The purpose of these meetings is to gather local food system stakeholders and introduce them to the Puget Sound Food Project (PSFP) in order to: inventory local food system activities and resources; survey local opportunities and obstacles faced by producers; and identify key local stakeholders who are interested in participating in the PSFP strategic planning process.

Key producer obstacles identified to date include the lack of affordable or accessible processing facilities and frequent regulatory barriers (especially health and planning). Most meeting attendees were concerned about the cost/benefit of adding value to their products or expanding production, considering the obstacles that currently exist.

Interest level in the PSFP is high at these meetings. Producers are currently sending their products long distances, even out of state, for processing. Some meeting attendees mentioned that existing processing resources are continually eroding, as commercial processors cease doing business in the area or become inaccessible to local producers.

In each county visited so far, there exists a patchwork of infrastructure for local food production and distribution. It will be important for the PSFP to recognize this infrastructure and work to collaborate with these existing local efforts in the course of the PSFP implementation.

A. Background

The purpose of the Puget Sound Food Project (PSFP) is to conduct strategic planning and analysis for a multi-purpose agricultural production facility to help farmers in the 12-county Puget Sound region meet the growing demand for local fresh and processed food products. Greg Lynn was hired as project manager on 9/3/07. A PSFP Steering Committee meeting was held 9/6/07 and work was begun on developing project description, timelines and deliverables.

The first phase of the project includes:

- creating a data base of project contacts;
- developing project educational documents;
- researching models provided by similar projects in the US;
- identifying parallel efforts by other groups in the Puget Sound area; and
- developing scenarios on how the project might be best structured for success in collaboration with these efforts.

B. Current Project Status

A number of tasks are underway to more fully refine the scope of the PSFP. These include: 1) identifying and communicating with local food stakeholders in each of the Puget Sound counties to introduce them to the PSFP; 2) determining what local activities, existing and planned, are taking place which parallel the PSFP; and 3) recruiting key stakeholders to participate in the PSFP strategic planning process who could attend meetings scheduled, tentatively, in November 2007 and January 2008.

1. Community Outreach Meetings

In cooperation with county extension agents, meetings have been held or scheduled in 5 of the twelve Puget Sound counties, with the remainder of these “county” meetings to be held prior to October 31, 2007.

Information from the meetings held to date indicates that there may be key factors in determining each area’s “readiness” to support the PSFP. These key factors include:

- presence of mid-sized producers interested in PSFP participation;
- absence of available local food processing resources, for example: inspected slaughtering, shared-kitchen, freezer or cold storage facilities, etc.;
- presence of local food production support by the local community: agriculture commission or board, food policy council, farmland protection/preservation program, current food assessment study, farm guide or locator, agriculture or business incubator resources;
- presence and consumer support of local farmer’s markets, both public and commercial;
- local stakeholder desire to participate in a collaborative effort in re-localizing the food supply; and
- local stakeholder perception of the greater Puget Sound area as part of their “foodshed.”

In particular, interest in the PSFP has included concerns about protecting the community food supply in times of crisis: road/transportation interruptions, natural or manmade disasters, etc. Many of the meeting attendees were thankful of this PSFP effort, indicating that the project may be well-received as a timely, much-needed resource.

Other concerns voiced during the meetings held so far include: the need to influence public policy regarding community support of local food producers; increased protection of the local food supply; and organizing “trade shows” to introduce equipment and other tools needed by small and medium-sized farmers and food producers in the Puget Sound area. Although these concerns may fall outside the scope of the PSFP, they may be passed along to the PSFP partners that may be better positioned to address them.

2. Key Factors to Consider

a. Infrastructure Concerns

Each county in the Puget Sound region contains an existing patchwork of infrastructure for food production and distribution. It will be critical to the success of the PSFP to establish communication with the stakeholders of this existing infrastructure and work to build upon the successes that they have already achieved.

b. Addressing Stakeholder Interests

The success of the PSFP will be measured, in part, by its ability to address the needs of local stakeholders. The following chart includes a summary of needs/interests for each group identified as key food system stakeholders in the Puget Sound region.

STAKHOLDER GROUP	INTEREST/NEED
Food Producers	farm viability, increased profitability, expanded markets, year-round sales, affordable processing & distribution help
Food Distributors	meeting customer needs, increased profitability, expanded markets, ease in sourcing local foods
Consumers	increased access to local foods, healthy foods, food quality
Economic Development	food dollars stay local, jobs created
Community	social viability & health, protection of community food supply
Environmental Stewards	fewer food miles, smaller carbon footprint, resource protection
Farmland Protection	increased production acres, viability of area agriculture

c. Producer Obstacles Encountered

As representatives of the food production communities are interviewed regarding the obstacles encountered in their efforts to provide increasing quantities of locally produced food to the local markets, recurring themes have emerged:

- difficulty in finding reliable and/or affordable, processing, packaging and storage facilities located within a reasonable distance from farming areas’
- lack of uniform health department regulations or differing interpretations and/or enforcement of health regulations from jurisdiction to jurisdiction;
- lack of health department resources identifying the availability of licensed “community kitchens”;
- lack of “one-stop shopping” for resources relevant to the availability of food production tools; and
- lack of financial incentives for food producers considering expansion of food production.

As mentioned earlier, some of the concerns expressed in interviews with local food producers may not be addressed in the context of the PSFP but may be passed along to its partners for further research and consideration.

3. Project Challenges

Public awareness of local food concerns is increasing. Many agricultural, consumer, health, environmental and regulatory groups have begun discussions about the benefits of a more localized food system. The PSFP is well-timed and well-positioned to take a leadership role in the development of a new Puget Sound food system based upon the increased consumption of locally-produced foods.

The PSFP has been welcomed by producers and key decision makers in the Puget Sound region as a much-needed resource. Maintaining communication with these food system stakeholders during the successive phases of the project will be a key to affecting positive change in the regional food system now and into the future.

From Greg Lynn, Project Manager, Puget Sound Food Project