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Fifth Season Cooperative is Launched

Local food producers and institutional food buyers recently received a new way of coordinating access to locally grown food. The Fifth Season Cooperative was officially launched as board members signed the articles of incorporation on August 10, 2010. This new business will connect producers of locally grown produce, meat and dairy, with institutional markets who want to buy local food for their cafeterias or restaurants. It is the result of months of planning and collaboration initiated through a Buy Local Buy Wisconsin Grant from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection that was awarded to the Vernon Economic Development Association in January, 2010.

“Many small to mid-sized family farms in the region have considerable capacity to produce high-quality foods, but lack access to local markets. We’re excited that the Fifth Season Cooperative will establish the structured coordination and processing, marketing and distribution infrastructure necessary to bring local fresh and value-added food products to area consumers. It will also create more income for our local producers by responding to new markets,” notes Sue Noble, Executive Director of Vernon Economic Development Association.

The seven-member interim board, which will oversee operations until elections are held in early 2011, represents the diversity of the food and agriculture industry in the 7 Rivers Region. Its members include Terry Hoyum, co-owner and manager of Premier Meats; Mark Hutson, administrative director of nutrition services for Gundersen Lutheran; Pete Kondrup, general manager of Westby Co-op Creamery; Nicole Penick, Buy Local Coordinator for Fifth Season Cooperative; Larry Ringgenberg, director of student centers at UW-La Crosse; Marilyn Volden, food service director for Viroqua Public Schools; and Brian Wickert, owner of EZ Farming. All seven members are committed to the cooperative’s mission to produce, process and market healthy, local foods in our region by supporting the values of environmental, social and economic fairness for all.

In a 2008 study of the western Wisconsin region by the Crossroads Resource Center, renowned economist Ken Meters revealed that each year consumers in Western Wisconsin spend \$208 million buying food from outside the region. This, in conjunction with the \$33 million farmers lose each year producing food commodities, results in a total annual loss of \$376 million of potential wealth in the area. A lack of infrastructure and structured coordination between producers, processors, and purchasers creates a barrier to selling and purchasing local food in western Wisconsin. If the region’s consumers were to purchase 25% of their food directly from farmers, it would produce \$33 million of new farm income each year – enough to offset current farm production losses. The Fifth Season Cooperative fills this gap by providing the coordination and infrastructure required for local producers to process and store fresh and value-added food products and distribute them to large-scale institutions in the 7 Rivers Region.

The Cooperative will be comprised of six unique member classes: producers, producer groups, food processors, distributors, buyers, and workers of the cooperative. With six member classes, the Fifth Season Cooperative is one of the first of its kind in the United States. There are very few multi-stakeholder cooperatives in the United States and many in the business field see them as too

challenging. USDA cooperative development specialist Margaret Bau, however, has a different take. “For systems that are as precious and complex as local foods, the metaphor of the invisible hand of the market has too many flaws. When rebuilding local food systems, you need to have diverse interests at the table and in an ongoing relationship of equals (as fellow members). This is an ongoing learning relationship, and what better way to foster that than to have a co-equal ownership stake.”

Businesses and institutions from across the region have already expressed a strong interest in buying and selling local meat, produce, dairy and value-added products through the cooperative. So far, the list of potential buyers includes Western Technical College, Three Rivers Waldorf School, The Root Note Restaurant, UW-La Crosse, Gundersen Lutheran, Viroqua Public Schools, Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School, and Vernon Memorial Hospital. On the producer side, Driftless Organics, EZ Farming, Harmony Valley Farm, Harvest Moon Farm, Keewaydin Organics, Noble Organics, Organic Valley, Premier Meats, and Westby Co-op Creamery have all shown interest in joining the cooperative.

For now, the Cooperative’s goal is to help increase the purchase of local food by a minimum of 3% for medium-scale institutions and 10% for large-scale institutions by the end of 2011. According to Nicole Penick, the Cooperative’s first staff member, the long-term goals are even more ambitious than that. “Our vision is to help facilitate a regional food system that provides nutritious food for the local population, economic prosperity for the region’s farms and businesses, and a healthy environment for all.”

For more information or to learn how to become a member contact Sue Noble, Executive Director of Vernon Economic Development Association at 637-5396 or Nicole Penick, Buy Local Coordinator at 608-637-3615.

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