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Pat Osterberg
Food Service Director
Minnewaska Schools



Fresh Connect Food Hub Improving Health through Local Food Access

What would make it easier for schools to serve fresh local foods? In 2014, the Fresh Connect Food Hub (FCFH) paved a way as it picked up, aggregated, and delivered 34,173 pounds of fresh produce from local farms to school districts. Working alongside PartnerSHIP 4 Health who served as members of advisory and core planning committees, Fresh connect is proving itself through quality and affordability. Participating food service directors of all backgrounds were pleasantly surprised at the results of Fresh Connect's pilot year.

What's a food hub?

Food hubs are organizations that actively manage the aggregation and distribution of locally grown foods from small to medium growers to regional institutions and restaurants. Food hubs specialize in connecting growers who have limited outlets for their produce to local purchasers.

The Lakes Country Service Cooperative (LCSC) food hub acts as an aggregator and delivery service. They purchase fresh whole produce from small growers in and around the region, package it into quantities ordered by members, and deliver to their location for a delivery fee. Growers are freed from marketing and delivery and members are freed from finding multiple growers to supply their needs and arranging for pick-up or delivery. Fresh, local produce is tracked and handled according to USDA regulations.

How did the process start?

Planning for the FCFH began in December 2013 with a core team from LCSC, PartnerSHIP 4 Health and the University of Minnesota Extension Service, led by LCSC Registered Dietitian, Dana Rieth. The Food Hub has been helped immensely by the regional advisory team: Donna Twedt, Moorhead Area Public Schools; Gretchen Boyum, grower; Penny Doty, USDA NRCS; Harold Stanislawski, Otter Tail County Economic Development; Guy Fischer, Becker County Economic Development; Ryan Pesch, Minnesota Extension Services; Janet Lindberg, PartnerSHIP 4 Health; Greg Wagner and Wendy Merrick, West Central Initiative.

LCSC used grants during its first year to conduct a feasibility study to determine a startup plan for the food hub. LCSC also received an equipment grant to purchase coolers, a delivery truck, scales and stainless steel worktables to fulfill the packaging and delivery services of the hub.

Pat Osterberg comes from a background in food service. He grew up in a family who was in the restaurant business and said, "By the time I was ten years old I was bussing tables." He spent a few years exploring a singing career and later going to school, but ended up back in food service at Minnewaska Schools. He now has 25 years of experience as the Food Service Director of Minnewaska Schools. Because he is nearing retirement, Osterberg is of the mentality of not taking on projects that won't directly and efficiently benefit his schools. As a result, when he first agreed to participate Fresh Connect, he was not fully convinced of its value. His focus was on obtaining good



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produce at a good price, as opposed to supporting local farmers. After experiencing the benefits of Fresh Connect, he couldn't see any reason not to be a part of it. "I was really wondering what I was getting myself into when I promised to buy a certain amount of this produce. I was very surprised by the quality of the product. Pricewise it's in the ballpark. Anyone that does what I do for a living and with the rules that I have to live with, this is a great thing...Fresh Connect is pretty convenient for those who live in this area; there aren't really any excuses [not to participate]."

Food Service Director of Dilworth-Glyndon-Felton Schools Chelsey Newton comes from the opposite end of the spectrum compared to Osterberg. Fresh into her career in food service, Newton a registered dietitian which gives her the expertise to understand the nutritional breakdown of fitting school meals into national guidelines. Although getting students to try new things is always a challenge that comes with her job, Newton has been able to incorporate Fresh Connect produce into the school food program in fun ways. She uses the fresh fruits and vegetables in the creation of new recipes, allowing the kids to try healthy foods and see that they do taste good.

Newton also found Fresh Connect appealing because it offers a wide variety of produce from a single source. In addition, she noted the quality and flavor of the produce is superior to that of distributors. The students at her schools have responded positively as well. "Students take a lot more from the salad bar because of the flavor and variety. We're able to provide watermelon which we would normally never provide because the watermelon offered by distributors is too expensive and not as tasty."

Food Service Director of Perham Schools, Krystal Boyd was previously a dietary manager at a nursing home but made the switch to food service in September of 2014. Her background as a dietary manager has allowed Boyd to understand that "nutrition is always going to be a number one priority" in the daily lives of her students. Although she felt that Fresh Connect was the healthier option, it also made the most sense for Boyd's schools financially. When she first got to Perham Schools, their food program was struggling due to over budgeting problems. Fresh Connect Food Hub ended up being the most cost effective option for her program. This combined with the ability to provide fresh rather than canned fruits and vegetables made it easy for Boyd to choose Fresh Connect. "When the kids can tell the difference, it makes our decision easier to make," she said.

Food Service Directors from varying backgrounds and levels of experience have participated in Fresh Connect Food Hub and have all come to agree that Fresh Connect is a benefit to their schools. Most importantly, Fresh Connect creates an accessible, affordable, and local way for schools to provide students with the nutrients they need to maintain their health as well as to achieve academically during the school day.

During its pilot year FCFH concentrated on making inroads with primarily with schools but also delivered to a hospital, nursing home, and a day care.

Now in year two FCFH has 32 purchasers up from 15 the year before which includes few more schools but also healthcare, assisted living, nursing homes, a veterans home, and a University. FCFH looks to double its amount of produce from year one as it works its way towards sustainability.

"As we move forward we see a real need for continuing education for purchasers and consumers on the benefits of eating fresh local produce and on what to expect when buying and preparing local produce." "We're excited about the future and how the FCFH can serve a role in strengthening our local economy while making an impact on preventative health", states Jane Eastes, LCSC Operations Director

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