

Farm to School Connections Team notes

12.13.07

Attendees: Eric Boutin (Auburn School District), Anita Finch (Seattle Schools), Wendy Weyer (Seattle Schools), Kaye Wetli (Riverview School District), Elise DeGooyer (NW Harvest), Liz Fikejs (Parent, Schmitz Park Elementary), JP Kemmick (Tacoma/Pierce Health Dept.), Sarah Gariton (Pierce Conservation District), Carrie Sikorski (Pierce County FARM Program), Sara Coulter (UW Public Health), Martha Aitken (WSU Extension/FoodSense), Jamie Baird (Baird Orchards), Jennifer Langston (Seattle P-I), Kathy Walker (Shoreline Schools), Sylvia Kantor (WSU King County Extension), Meghan Pinch (UW Urban Planning), Viki Sonntag (EcoPraxis), Tim Crosby (21 Acres), Steve Evans (King County Ag Program), Tricia Sexton (WSU King County Extension)

Introductions.

Tricia handed out information on healthy schools summit in May. The planning committee seeking additional members.

Update: No Child Left Inside legislation, HB 1677 passed last year— Washington is the first state in the nation to pass legislation to encourage getting kids physical and out side. Agriculture and nutrition education is part of criteria. They will be seeking lots of applications to demonstrate need and secure future funding. More information can be found at www.parks.wa.gov/NoChildLeftInside and will also be sent out to the listserv as it becomes available.

Next Meeting: January 17, 2008, 11am-1pm at the Capitol Hill Branch of Seattle Public Library – Will feature policy updates and a Panel of Distributors and Processors: Sharon Whalen of Duck Delivery, Mike Bennet of Pacific Prepak, Inc., and Abbi Little of Abbi's Northwest. Possibly others.

Still planning February's meeting. Looking for Parents who've been working on initiatives in their schools to share experiences and challenges. Will also include food educators working in schools.

Local Farms – Healthy Kids

Mo McBroom, Washington Environmental Council

WEC is working to change state law to get local food into schools and other state institutions. This is a broad-based effort, where environmentalists are teaming up with public health, faith, poverty organizations to change state requirements to allow purchasing from local farms. The bill would set up a Farm-to-School Program administered by the Dept. of Agriculture, set up a state-funded fruits and vegetable program, encourage local purchasing by state institutions. The package also includes several different funding pieces. Campaign going very well. It is considered important and is recognized as timely by legislators. In fact they already have legislators asking to be listed as sponsors—usually doesn't happen until January. The Prime Sponsors are Representative Eric Pettigrew and Senator Brian Hatfield.

This year is a 60 day vs 90 day legislative session and during this every-other-year short session, a budget is not created, hence very little money is available. It will be a crazy, rushed, quick effort. To maintain momentum— they need to get as many people involved as possible, to send emails, sign an endorsement form and attend the upcoming WEC legislative workshop and Environmental Lobby Day.

Kaye Wetli: Have you reached out to agriculture, produce farmers and wheat growers?

Mo: Not much outreach to wheat, since schools' focus is usually fruits and vegetables, but it's a good idea. State conservation districts and the Farm Bureau will likely support the package, which would be nothing short of historic, if the environmentalists and the Bureau are testifying side by side. To get their support, the legislation should not include language about organics.

Sylvia Kantor: Is the Washington Food and Farming Alliance supportive?

Mo: They are 100% there. The more advice and connections with agriculture, the better.

Tricia: If those at the meeting have any suggestions for agricultural organizations and how they can help, please pass those suggestions on to Mo.

Carrie Sikorski: Can you tell us about Representative Chris Hurst's legislation?—it seems similar. And who is supporting your bill?

Mo: Don't know much about Hurst's bill. There is bi-partisan support and a wide swath of support by the democratic caucus, not usual environmental champions. Ten people have said they want their name on the bill. It's a really good roster for mid-December. Hurst may be doing his own bill because this is a hot issue. Our effort has huge momentum and support. I hope to integrate Hurst's issues into larger effort.

Trica: If anyone is familiar with Hurst's bill, or does learn more, please send it out to the listserv.

Megan Pinch: I understand the public health benefit of Farms to Schools. Not as clear on the environmental perspective. How did this become an environmental priority?

Mo: The decision feels natural, but from the outside, it may look a little funny and not what the environmentalists do. Farm land preservation issues have been a priority of my organization. The environmental value of small and mid size farms is pretty clear from the perspective of land use. We also realize that we need to show a commitment to the farming community, that we must keep markets viable, because it needs to be profitable to remain in farming

Sylvia: Does climate change factor in?

Mo: that is not really what we are trumpeting. Supporting a more holistic way of consuming and disposing. We are leading with farmland preservation message.

Vicki: Doesn't demand for produce exceed supply?

Mo: Legislation does not mandate, but is more of a statutory and regulatory framework and it provides dollars to get things started. The demand and supply issue does not impact importance of legislation. In fact my conversations with farmers reveal access problems and difficulty id'ing local markets. Farmers want to do more.

Carrie: I just want to confirm that. Pierce County has had buy overstock and distribute in food programs, and some farms have been plowing crops back in.

Sarah Garitone: Pierce Conservation District will be conducting a capacity survey to learn more about this.

Mo: There is a market in schools---farmers often lack capacity. Or, maybe we can change procurement and bidding restrictions, allow schools to make a single larger purchase. There is funding in the bill to look at joint processing, packaging, distribution, etc.

Wendy Weyer: Isn't that a part of the Food and Fitness Initiative? Are you duplicating existing efforts?

Sylvia: The scope of the bill-funded study is larger. It would feed into Food and Fitness work.

Mo: We want input, these efforts combine many different tools. This work on policy and budget will make major steps forward. Excited that this is a great foundation for the larger effort. Should make it easier to get work done in future years.

Vicki: Can you distribute a copy of the legislation?

Mo: Legislation ready for review likely after the holidays. To get on the listserv, fill out the endorsement form and note that you want to see legislation.

Jaime Baird: Please keep in mind. Selling to Wal-Mart is simple. Selling to many smaller organizations is more complicated.

Food Service Directors Panel Discussion

Tricia had food service directors introduce themselves and tell us about their experience and challenges. Paul Flock could not make it. Tricia apologizes, as this was a communication failure. Paul noted that there is an article in the Olympian—Tricia brought copies.

Kathy Walker, Shoreline School District. We are trying to get more fresh fruits and vegetables, which has been well received. Having options that are grab-and-go is critical at the middle and high school level. Kids won't make own salad, but they may pick one up. We bring in what Puget Sound food co-op offered. We were also into Tree Top slices in bag. But, distribution problems meant not always fresh.

In Alaska, we had baby carrots, 150 lbs per week. Carrots were a popular product. But our short growing season made it tough and it was hard to get another source. Being able to communicate with farmers is crucial. We got potatoes for a while, but cleanliness of product was a problem. Labor was a big factor. It was worth while. But it affected our main dish menu planning, since the potatoes took so much staff time.

Carrie: How did you initiate contact with farmers.

Kathy: My secretary called farmers who sold and got lowest price. We brought in as a big group like this. Alaska does not use pesticides and I realized I could help the local economy. So many were growing all potatoes and carrots. We developed an agreement with local farmers. Very exciting

Eric Boutin, Auburn School District: All 23 schools have fresh fruit and vegetables, our elementary schools get fresh fruit vegetables from a grant that has a note card with information on where it is grown. It is a wonderful program. His district serves 10 k lunches, 3k breakfasts a day, and 70,000 meals in the summer. We work with FoodSense and the Health Department's Mission Delicious. Not funded for cafeteria staff to be in classroom as educators.

In last two years, working with local farmers, has been a struggle. My family participates in farmers markets, and I hand out my card to build connections. Also has contacted farms in Puget Sound Fresh. I need it simple. I need a farmer to tell me he has Fuji apples, 30 cases to be delivered at what price. Give me something like that and we can do business. I go to farmers markets and get a 100 lbs. of cherries and say that I'd like to do more. Nothing happens, nothing

happens. It is so hard to network. I can get carrots with tops on or other special products, but don't have an on-going relationship. This is not a pricing issue, since I'm not quoting them a price need. We need a liaison between farmer and purchasing entity.

The King County school food directors share a vision on local food, funding is the problem. We have to deal with the bidding process or go for best price. The better the price, the more we can use.

Anita Finch, Seattle Public Schools. Seattle has 96 schools total. 10 middle, 10 high school, and a number of alternative schools with no kitchens at those sites. 20 head start programs. We run the City of Seattle summer food program, where we vend meals and snacks. Is proud of summer food program – a great program with appealing food.

Our numbers are large, and this is a major roadblock. Our joke is that farmers visit, but only once. Our numbers scare them away. We have waited for farmers to knock on door.

We have worked with Duck's produce—farms in Yakima— and have gotten plums apples, pears, prunes. In partnership with Duck's we have established relationships with farms. We are able to get WA carrots and squash and OR watermelon pears, plums. We consider the NW region as locally grown produce.

When farm to cafeteria farm started we went to Pikes Market. They need to be paid up front. The district only pays after the purchase. We have worked with Pine creek orchards in Omak for apples, only because we had a bid in place with a vendor who would work with us—cannot purchase food from other vendor even if they are willing to work with you. But the farmer realized that he can make better money selling to Europe.

I appreciate what Growing Washington is doing and what Clayton had to say at the last meeting. Because of our quantity needs, have not been able to work with them.

Abbi's Northwest is sending us a fresh sheet. Could work with them through the grant program with the USDA because it's more money for purchases. Our summer food program outstanding, fresh every day, strawberries, blueberries, melon all summer long. If produce was available at reasonable price, during school year we do it. Whenever you add red to a meal it has "eye appeal."

Wendy: Abby's fresh sheet is great, but we can get similar product can be found with our prime vendor. But it comes down to price. Is this a smart use of dollars? I can provide 3 x more apples for those kids with the lower price. This presents a moral dilemma.

Eric: I think that the perception that we are not already helping the local farmer is not accurate. Most of our fruit boxes are from Washington state. Not that we can't do more.

Tricia: How does that work? Do you ask specifically for Grown in Washington or does it just frequently happen through vendors?

Eric: I say, "we want Washington produce, what is your price?" Bid process structure is the issue. We have a set amount and have to stay within that. I just have a certain responsibility to break even. Our grant guidelines for the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program specifically encouraged "buy local" last year. This year it said specifically, "you can not ask source." I need three quotes and must demonstrate the price. Uniqueness could differentiate product, but it is a challenge. (such as asking for a variety of apple grown here)

Anita: The state requires 40 to 75 k to go out for quotes and over 75 k to go to bid. Seattle district is more restrictive - requires any thing over 15 k get quotes. The district requires anything over 50k to be bid. We have to abide by those rules. If I try to be unique, and I could do that, that takes a lot of administrative work. It's pretty mind-boggling. So the districts would need to look at their policies.

Carrie: is there a timing issue? When do the bids go out, and does this work with farmers' timelines?

Anita: we start looking at bids in January. It is a huge project. Usually takes two months to process. Bids must go in front of board. Everything on the street has to get back to the board by March. They act on those prices by August. We try to cover the resent year plus two and three years out. Many belong to the Puget Sound Co-op, which is very helpful.

Mo: Who makes bid requirement level at school district?

Anita: don't know. It's been that way for years. Board would approve.

Carrie: For farmers, having the bid acceptance in August will not work, since they will have to plan and plant long before.

Eric: Some offices can do weekly comparative prices in lieu of more formal bid.

I am not clear on the goals of this group. Is the goal to have us hook up directly with local farmers rather than work with distributors? What works for me is, "tell me what you have and tell me what the price is, and I will try to work something out to. Creates a conundrum with local vs. easy. For this to work, it is the food service director working longer hours because we have no infrastructure. The Director sets the tone and it is based upon personal commitment.

Tim Crosby: What policy would you like to see changed at state level?

Anita: Change in the law itself won't be easy. Bid laws are set up to be competitive. I think there is some discussions at the federal law that local be preferenced. Harkin is working for local preference in Farm Bill.

Wendy: We have to address logistics and design it to be successful in big and small districts.

Eric: There is the issue of individual farms vs. collective, distributors. It is still a challenge to do business with 18 local farmers vs. just Duck farms.

Vicki: One of the programs I am familiar with held bidding workshops that would bring farmers in to sort through problems, administrative costs, and processes. Does this type of direct support and administrative assistance appeal to you?

Eric: I don't know. For me distribution is a huge problem because all 22 kitchens receive an order. I do prefer farmer to farmer relationships. It is onerous every time we go to farmers markets and get a single delivery and then have to come in centrally to redistribute to each school. Those transaction costs, we are eating because we believe in the idea.

Wendy: Ecotrust in Oregon works with Portland Public Schools and had a program where there were RFP's for local produce. Only one farmer submitted a bid. Farmers needed help filling out RFP. Maybe we could hold workshops to train them.

Carrie: Established farmers unlikely to participate in a workshop.

Eric: We need a coordinator who is a liaison and understands both sides. If things are clear, we can do business, filling out forms, etc.

Sarah: How do farmers make that connection on how the system works?

Anita, Eric: Simple, just ask.

Eric: If vendors understand origin is important they will find a way to hook up with local farms

Carrie: we need to build infrastructure.

Eric: What is the purpose of these meetings?

Tricia: We don't have a specific agenda. By talking to all sides and creating a forum for discussion we figure out how to meet obstacles. This year, we are trying to learn from each other because it is clear that the various players necessary for farm-to-school do not understand the challenges faced by the other players. Hopefully, professionals and people advocating will learn the best approach.

Mo: This is so important as we shape policy, to make sure we are going in right direction. You need someone doing leg work, so you all don't have to do it? Would this make things easier, so that you are not handing out cards?

Anita: It is for me. We started these discussions in 2004, and we are saying same thing today.

Mo: You need more money? It would help if you are subsidized? I am still trying to get a handle on legal barriers. The bill I am working on does not prefer a direct connection to farms, but simply more local into food stream. How they plan to procure at the state level—if we found a way to ensure state contracts, vendors are incorporating local.

Anita: How does the state supercede the district—don't know. Does that filter down to the district level?

Steve Evans: They must follow state guidelines?

Anita: Districts are often more restrictive.

Kathy: What if a portion could be purchased locally, like 25%, 30%?

Mo: Allowing more flexibility to purchase off contract, would that be good?

Eric: I have a certain responsibility to be efficient. Justifying a high price is bad. Subsidy that allows reporting of reasonable price would be helpful.

Wendy: Meal planning involves flexibility. We need a dialogue back, about price and timing. We could use a coordinator in support of farmers. Our menus are all done in advance, so we could use what's coming in season, etc.

Sylvia: A state coordinator could be tasked with doing this at a more local level.

Vicki: Mid-size farmers who are in transition may have the volume to do bidding. They would need help with transition and outreach. I am not sure it comes from the school district. But, instead it goes through distributors. There should be some provision for outreach to those with capacity.

Steve: I see on your menu that several of the items identified as local are processed. Do you make or purchase entrees?

Wendy: What we purchase and make, depends on volume, and our ability to produce. Tend to have pre-made foods early in week, as staff works on home-made meals for end of week. It take three days to make spaghetti, while also doing other lunches. We have limitations with our facilities and have to balance production, purchase and the high cost of labor. Labor is 60 % of every dollar. My menu planning dilemma is that I must provide calorie level. For K-5, it's 675 cal per day. Apples, vegetables are low cal. Larger and larger piece of single dollar on food, time they have to eat, class recess, wanting prime entrée where attention is focused, nutrient dense. Tipping point—fruit and veg bars. 30 to 40% of dollars. Most kids—k-3 then going in garbage. 3 to 5 % increase per plate would be great.

The USDA Fresh fruit and veg grant provides too much money per child. Impractical. It became a gluttonous thing, and kids stop appreciating. Lose purpose. Would be better to spread it so all schools get more money, instead of large amounts to few schools.

Tim: What would be the best flexibility from the state level? Over 300 schools would qualify. The challenge is how to draft state program to allow more schools to get less money, depending on legislative funding amount.

Eric: we have grant because we are thankful. Too much maybe if there was money—like if each school got 15 k to spend locally. Kept outside of federal program, to spend with WA farmer. Wouldn't have to worry about bidding.

Martha Aitken: Just wanted to emphasize that my son chooses whether to buy lunch based on entrée—they are important. Question about times when the food supply is vulnerable, like flooding? Does this affect schools, if you're planning in advance?

Anita: It is HUGE. We have to work with issues of food safety and getting healthy food in a timely manner. You can't tell children in Seattle there is no food.

Wendy: We must adjust to climate issues. When lettuces got too expensive because of crop failures, did not serve salad for months. Stopped serving iceberg last year for a while and used only romaine. You adjust. Flexible.

Eric: insurance and liability are issues. We have to have some level of confidence we can trace back to farm. Less certainty. Farms have to be either HACCP certified for food safety, or prove equivalent practice. Convince us that things are ok.

Kaye Wetli, Riverview School District: 3k students 88 t 1k meals a day. Salad bars, fresh fruits and veg, supplement canned, frozen, dried. Purchase from FSA, federal commodities. Have not pursued buying from local farms. Wanted to get idea of how this could work. Very exciting. Never been approached by farms.