RI Agricultural Partnership 5-Year Strategic Plan
Outreach Interviews
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Description of Farm Fresh RI

Farm Fresh RI (FF) was started in 2004; initially it ran a few farmers markets in Providence—connecting farmers and eaters by brining healthy/nutritious food to urban areas. FF has since been asked to run other markets in Providence and have started markets in other urban areas that had been without access to local/fresh food. They run 7 summer and 1 winter markets and provide assistance to other markets around the state, such as support around food stamps. FF has a website which includes a map with farms, markets, pick your own operations, and other opportunities to buy local food. The website is searchable and updated by farmers—over 100,000 users in the last month in the 3 states (RI, MA, and CT).

Opportunities and challenges around farmers markets

Not clear if there are too many farmers markets in the state, but no need to regulate the number of markets. Some markets are not letting new farmers in, thus some farmers are looking for more opportunities. Some markets might have too much competition. Some markets are reluctant to let larger farms into a market and risk smaller farms not being able to compete.

There are opportunities to build markets around transportation hubs (i.e. Amtrak station in Providence) which would provide access to local food for more consumers.

FF manages a year-round market from November to May. The market is 3 years old and has grown from 12 to 50 vendors, with 30 of the 50 vendors being farmers. There is some desire to expand to more than one day a week and discussion around making kiosks more permanent. There are 2 new year-round markets in the southern part of the state this year.

EBT machines are available at a total of 18 markets in the state including all FF markets (7). As of 2010, all markets in the urban core will have EBT. FF is working with Wholesome Wave to offer double coupons. FF is fundraising to continue this program and would like to expand. In 2009, the first year to offer double coupons (at a $10 max/day), FF markets saw an 800% increase in EBT sales; in 2010, the max was $5/day and still a 400% increase in EBT sales.

Market Mobile

FF started their Market Mobile program in 2009 after many chefs were asking for better access to local food. The online system creates one order form and one delivery of products from multiple farms; farms set their own prices. The program has already hit

$.5 million in sales and projects $2.5 million in four years—projection based upon expanding past restaurants and into schools and institutions.

Farmers need technical assistance to transition toward this wholesale model as many smaller farmers need help getting their packing house in order. There is also a need for more food production acreage/more famers to meet the demand. FF projects a need of 200 acres to meet the $2.5 million in sales.

RI Agriculture Challenges & Opportunities
(NOTE: draft document from Noah inserted below)

1. Small Farmers
    a. Finding staff to sell product at markets
    b. Identifying successful markets/customers to target
    c. Adapting to competition from mid-sized farmers who are increasingly turning to farmers market
    d. Expanding their farm production and operations (i.e. packing/harvesting) to grow wholesale opportunities
2. Mid-sized Farmers
    a. Finding the right balance of direct sales and wholesale
    b. Adapting the farm business to the type of farming that appeals to the next generation of the family
    c. Scaling up operations/production with appropriate equipment, production, staffing
    d. Diversification or specializiation?
3. Public Perception
    a. Making the economic case for local food
    b. Making the health connection
    c. Environment connection
    d. Better quality and flavor
    e. Dispelling myth that local costs more
    f. Education around eating seasonally
    g. Education about the diversity of RI grown/produced foods
    h. Buy Local branding
    i. Addressing concerns about enough local supply
4. Target Groups
    a. Consumers
        i. Points of sale – Food Stamps / credit card infrastructure at farm stands and markets
        ii. Tourism opportunities – links to culinary, agrotourism
        iii. Farm stands – what if farmers supplemented their own produce with other farms' to fill out their retail offerings (possible to expand one stop shopping model with larger/permanent farm stores)
        iv. Farmers Markets
            1. year-round/indoor infrastructure

            2. challenge of different management groups/structures across the 45 markets
            3. is there such a thing as too many markets? where are there opportunities for more/better markets?
    b. Chefs
    c. Schools
        i. Increased local production
    d. Hospitals and Workplace Cafeterias
        i. Increased local production
    e. Grocers
        i. Increased local production
5. Legislative Priorities
    a. Defining “local”? (currently no state definition for “local”)
    b. Food Processing Licensings

There may be a need for a guide to help farmers/farm businesses navigate these issues as the regulations and license requirements are often unclear.

    c. Public funding for RI ag promotion
    d. Designating heritage breeds/cultivars special to RI (opportunities for value-added/market premium for RI based heritage breeds?)