FoodHub in the News

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By Mitch Lies

Computer System Links Farmers with Buyers

PORTLAND, OR – Ecotrust, a Portland-based nonprofit organization, on Oct. 30 is launching an online directory connecting food buyers with producers.

FoodHub, its creators hope, will help food buyers access local food and help farmers move product at premium prices.

“Ideally it will help (farmers) find customers where they can optimize the price they can receive for the product,” said Laura Barton, trade development manager for the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

The system, a year in the making, has its genesis in previous attempts by Ecotrust to connect food buyers with sellers. Ecotrust previously published an annual guide that listed farms and buyers.

“The problem with the guide, is it was often obsolete the day it was printed, because a restaurant would go out of business, or a raspberry crop would fail,” said Deborah Kane, a vice president of Ecotrust.

With FoodHub, food buyers can log on daily to see what product is available — and where. Farmers on any given day can post what they are selling.

“We want to create more transparency in the food system,” Kane said. “We want to make it easy for people to see who's buying and selling in the food market.”

The system is geared for use by large and small buyers and large and small farms, she said.
“It's not a tool just for chefs, but it's for institutional buyers, grocers and other large purchasers,” Kane said.

At www.food-hub.org, buyers can search for a particular product and narrow searches for products within a certain distance from their site.

The system is easy to use, Kane said.

“It's very user-friendly,” she said. “The goal was to create a system with lots of features, but not so many that even the dial-up user won't benefit from using the tool.”

Key to the success of the system, Barton said, could lie in how many use it.

Kane said Ecotrust hopes to sign up 500 members by year's end and double that by February. The goal is to double that again by the end of the summer.

Cost to become a FoodHub member is $100 a year.

The system initially will be available to users in Oregon, Washington, Northern California and Alaska, Kane said. Eventually, Ecotrust hopes to make FoodHub available to users across the West.

Much of the early work creating FoodHub was funded through federal grants administered by the Oregon and Washington state departments of agriculture.

FoodHub recently learned it has received an additional award of $100,000 in a USDA specialty crop grant administered by ODA. The grant is part of $1.5 million in USDA grants being distributed to Oregon companies by ODA.

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