

FoodHub in the News



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By Eric Mortenson

FoodHub Links Northwest Fresh Food Buyers with Producers

PORTLAND, OR – Portlanders love their food and their farmers, and Ann Wright sees it as more than a passing crush.

From her viewpoint—she’s deputy undersecretary for marketing with the U.S. Department of Agriculture—the metro area’s embrace of locally grown food is an element of economic recovery.

“Regional and local food systems are a big part of it,” Wright said Tuesday during a luncheon at Ecotrust, the Portland nonprofit that creates and funds economic, social justice and environmental programs.

A thriving local food system improves children’s health, reconnects us to the land, allows farmers to thrive and attracts new farmers into agriculture, Wright said. Consumer demand for fresh, local food has been growing for the past 15 to 20 years and shows no sign of fading. Americans spend an estimated \$4 billion annually on local food and “place-based purchases” are projected to increase to \$7 billion by 2012, she said.

“At the heart of it is consumer awareness about food choices,” Wright said. “They want their purchase to mean something.”

In the Pacific Northwest, that just got easier.

Wright was in town for the debut of FoodHub, an online directory developed by Ecotrust and intended to link food producers and buyers. The program, funded by federal money passed through the Oregon and Washington departments of agriculture, allows restaurant owners, for example, to find a local supplier of fruits, vegetables or meat. Farmers with produce to sell can list it in the system.

Type in the word “raspberry,” for instance, said Ecotrust Vice President Deborah Kane, and up pops a list of growers. A lamb processor could do the same to find buyers.

The program requires a \$100 annual membership fee. Users can customize searches to find or offer products by farming method, location and other factors.

To symbolically launch the program, Wright snipped a ribbon draped across a large image of the FoodHub home page (food-hub.org).

During a recent 90-day trial period, farmers offered 560 products and buyers searched for 646 products. Backers of the program believe it will be used by chefs, caterers, grocery chains and by large- and small-scale food producers. The Washington Department of Agriculture provided \$250,000 for a two-year startup contribution; the Oregon Department of Agriculture provided \$100,000 for one year.

The program was developed by Ecotrust’s “Food and Farms” program, which is intended to foster a “robust regional food economy” and provide residents with “daily access to the region’s bounty,” Kane said.

About 120 people attended the luncheon. Among them were chefs, farmers, wholesale produce distributors, state officials and activists.

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