

CCE-Jefferson's food hub project team, in collaboration with Food Venture Advisors (FVA), is developing a database of agricultural assets in Jefferson, Lewis, St. Lawrence, and Oswego counties. The team has been conducting surveys with producers and institutional buyers of local products. We have been asked if any emerging trends have been found and, if so, what the possible implications for the region are. Although we need to collect much more information, here are a few findings:

1. Out of the 18 beef producers surveyed so far, 0 have refrigerated/freezer vans or trucks. This might explain why only three of the 18 producers attend farmers' markets and why auctions are a practical way to sell cattle. Transporting beef (and in general all meat products) can be cumbersome and expensive. Solving the logistics of getting a very perishable product to markets is an important key to helping producers be profitable.
2. Twenty-seven out of 40 fruit and vegetable producers employ various strategies to extend their growing season. Greenhouses and hydroponics are just two examples of strategies that allow produce to be grown almost year-round. By utilizing indoor spaces to grow fruits and vegetables, producers can fill a void the North Country has for fresh, local produce throughout the colder months of the year. For all farms, no matter how big or small, extending the growing season can be crucial to sustaining the farm year-round. Without producers growing in the shoulder season, if not winter, the North Country would have to exclusively rely on fruits and vegetables imported from other parts of the country and world.
3. Two out of 14 maple producers in the region use buckets (rather than tubing systems) to harvest maple. While using buckets to harvest maple maintains the historical and cultural integrity of sugaring, it requires a great time commitment of the producer to yield large amounts of sap. This means that a small percentage of maple producers in the region may not be tapping all of their maple trees or reaching the full potential of the trees they are tapping. This represents a conundrum common to farmers as it is to businesses everywhere. To be profitable you need capital. The upfront costs of an agricultural business endeavor (like tubing systems to tap maple trees) can be significant.

Information like this is important for CCE and FVA to know because it can help both organizations not only better understand different obstacles producers and institutions may be facing, but also cooperatively figure out how to overcome some of those obstacles. Is there something the food hub could buy in bulk to assist producers, like boxes? Should CCE bring specific expertise from Cornell's College of Life Science and Statewide to address a specific need, such as changing food safety rules?

The food hub project team hopes to analyze all of the collected data, not just the three examples described above, to answer questions like these and find solutions that will help the four-county region's local food system thrive.

If you are a producer or institutional buyer interested in taking a survey, please contact CCE's Food Hub Project Coordinator at 315-788-8450.

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