

The Driftless Region Food and Farm Project

Building a Robust, Regional Food System in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin



VISION:

The Driftless Region Food and Farm Project aims to develop the social, physical and organizational infrastructure of the Driftless Region to support a robust, regional food system with a place-based culinary identity. We believe that building human capacity and improving information flow and transparency are integral to our work.

MISSION:

Our mission is to support the development of a sustainable, regional food system by convening producers, entrepreneurs, nonprofits, and private and public entities active in the Driftless Region, and linking them to each other and to resources that address their common challenges.

What if we could create a food system that decreases energy consumption, increases food security, creates healthy communities, provides fresh and local food for hundreds of thousands of people, addresses critical environmental challenges and offers new economic opportunities in a four-state region?

That is the intention of a diverse group of stakeholders in the Upper Midwest.

The Driftless Region Food and Farm Project is a coalition of farmers, consumers, institutions, agencies and organizations. Together, they aspire to meet the growing demand for local food by scaling up the production, aggregation, processing, distribution and marketing of food in the Driftless Region. The project was initiated with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Efforts are underway across the Driftless Region to expand the reach and impact of local and sustainable food enterprises. Owing to the size of the region and the fact that it spans four states, it is challenging to communicate these efforts across the region. As growers and entrepreneurs across the Driftless Region face similar challenges and

Figure 1. The Driftless Region



could benefit from collaboration, this networking and communication gap hinders the growth of a regional food system.

The Driftless Food and Farm Project is designed to step into this breach by linking people across the region who are working on food systems issues. In 2010, three meetings were held to build working relationships. The group facilitates region-wide communication through a variety of technologies. At a recent meeting, for example, producers, educators and food systems professionals learned from their peers about the challenges faced by local food businesses when attempting to expand into regional wholesale markets. Meeting participants left with a better understanding of the opportunities and obstacles to business expansion, as well as connections to dozens of people working on issues similar to their own.

Quarterly meetings are planned in the future that will continue to serve a dual purpose: relationship building

and education on shared issues that will contribute to the development of a regional food system. The group is operating under the concepts described in the ‘Tiers of the Food System’ framework (see insert).

Meeting participants have identified three areas for research, discussion and action:

- increasing infrastructure to support a regional food system,
- matching supply and demand, and
- marketing and branding regionalism.

The door is always open for participants in the process. The project organizers strive to engage new partners and welcome original voices at any juncture. Participants need not have joined in the beginning to be a part of Driftless Food and Farm Project efforts.

Why Regionalize a Driftless Area Food System?

The benefits of robust, sustainable, local food systems abound—stronger local economies, farmland preservation and a cleaner environment, to list a few. Could these benefits be replicated and amplified at a larger scale?

“Yes” is the resounding answer, according to a growing body of experts. Kate Clancy, Food Systems Consultant and Senior Fellow at the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, and Kathryn Ruhf, Coordinator of the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, write, “... we think that ‘regionalizing’ the food system—emphasizing and focusing on regions—may be the optimal model to meet the goals of a sustainable, secure and resilient food system.”¹

The picturesque Driftless bioregion offers ample natural, cultural, farming and human resources ripe for such a regional food system.

“As we move into an era of peak oil, climate change and environmental challenges, building a system that is regional will reduce our carbon footprint and provide flexibility and resiliency for feeding our communities.”

—Nicole Penick, Valley Stewardship Network, La Crosse, WI

This 24,000-square mile area (Figure 1), which includes 57 counties in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois, was not glaciated in the last ice age. As a result, the region is marked by rolling hills and meandering waterways, steep-sided ridges, caves and towering bluffs. With its hills and smaller parcels



of tillable land, much of the Driftless Region has remained in small-scale agriculture.

The beauty and bounty of the Driftless Region draw tourists from across the country, including the large population centers of Minneapolis, Madison, Milwaukee and Chicago. These are prime regional markets for foods grown and crafted in the Driftless Region.

The unique geography, soils and climate of the Driftless Region influence the taste and other qualities of food grown there. In French wine production, the idea that place influences product is called *terroir*. Fruits, vegetables, cheeses, meats and even oils produced in the Driftless Region boast unique flavors and a culinary identity that can be marketed across the region.²

Wine grape growers in the region recently secured federal status as the Upper Mississippi River Valley viticultural area, a designation that winemakers may now officially use in marketing wine made from grapes grown in the region.³ Many of Wisconsin's finest artisan cheeses, heritage apples and grass-fed meats hail from this region.

The Driftless area has a history of fostering innovation in sustainable agriculture. The area has one of the largest concentrations of organic and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms in the country, as well as a wide variety of entrepreneurial, food and farm-related business. The Driftless Region gave birth to one of the nation's most successful farmer

cooperatives: Organic Valley in La Farge, Wisconsin.⁴ Begun in 1988, Organic Valley reached \$532 million in sales within 20 years.

Scaling Up, Sustainably

Creating a resilient, regional food system means scaling up the volume of food grown and processed, and identifying or creating the infrastructure required to aggregate, distribute and market food across the region. In the Driftless Region—and across the United States—food supply chains lack mid-scale aggregation and distribution systems that can efficiently move local food into mainstream markets.⁵ Creating these systems requires both investments in infrastructure and greater access to affordable farm credit.⁶

Furthermore, these supply chains need to support small- to mid-sized farms and businesses that grow, process and market food in a way that contributes to the health of the environment, animals, people and communities. Efforts to scale up regional food systems depend on strategic alliances across the food chain that ensure the profitability of farms with a diversity in size and organizational structure.⁷

Efforts must also respect food sovereignty—the right of citizens to not only have enough food to eat, but also to choose where and how that food is grown, and access the specialty foods that define the culinary identity of the region.

The heart of scaling up a sustainable food system may be in value systems such as local, minimal chemical use, environmentally sound and supportive of the community. But, in order for the process to be relevant, it must be grounded in financial viability for producers and local economies.

One economic benefit of regional food systems is that they keep food dollars in the economy. Economists speak of the “multiplier effect,” or number of times a dollar circulates through a place. The higher the number, the longer the money remains in the area. Research has found that the multiplier effect can be four times greater in places dominated by smaller farms.⁸

“We need to learn the softer skills of building an economy that strengthens rural areas and feeds people better. We are going to learn those skills by building community-based food networks.”

—Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center, Minneapolis, MN

Scaling up represents a substantial leap from direct marketing efforts such as farmers' markets, where growers interact with their customers. Without this direct relationship between growers and eaters, regional food system efforts need to creatively communicate to consumers in supermarkets, restaurants and other retail establishments the uniqueness of the people who grow the food and the place where it is grown. The Driftless Food and Farm Project aims to share the stories that capture the special qualities of this region.

Partners

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (www.cias.wisc.edu) is working with other universities, extension offices and nonprofits across the region on the Driftless Region Food and Farm Project. For a complete list of partners, visit www.driftless.wisc.edu.

"The Driftless Project reflects ongoing changes in consumer values and food choices from cheap, fast, and easy to the desire for healthy, sustainably grown and accessible food ... built on relationships with people and the land from seed to table."

—Erin Schneider, Hilltop Community Farm, La Valle, WI

To learn about and support the Driftless Region Food and Farm Project, go to the project's blog at www.driftless.wisc.edu. Contact Michelle Miller at mmmille6@wisc.edu to learn about partnering opportunities.

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Sources

¹Clancy, Kate and Kathryn Ruhf. 2010. "Is Local Enough? Some Arguments for Regional Food Systems." *Choices*, 25:1. <http://www.choicesmagazine.org/magazine/article.php?article=114>. Accessed 7/8/10.

²Miller, Michelle. 2009. "Birthing *Terroir* in the Land of Sky Blue Waters." *Place-Based Foods at Risk in the Great Lakes*. Slow Food USA.

³U.S. Department of Treasury, Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau. 2009. Establishment of the Upper Mississippi River Valley Viticultural Area 29395–29401 (E9–14574). <http://regulations.justia.com/view/146293/>. Accessed 7/8/10.

⁴Organic Valley. "Our Story: Always Organic and Farmer-Owned Since 1988." <http://www.organicvalley.coop/about-us/overview/our-history/>. Accessed 7/8/10.

⁵Day-Farnsworth, Lindsey, Brent McCown, Michelle Miller, Anne Pfeiffer. 2009. *Scaling Up: Meeting the Demand for Local Food*. UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems.

⁶Harve, Alicia and Hilde Steffey. 2010. *Rebuilding America's Economy with Family Farm-Centered Food Systems*. Farm Aid, Inc.

⁷Stevenson, Steve. 2009. *Values-based food supply chains: Executive Summary*. UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems. <http://www.agofthemiddle.org/pubs/vexecsum.pdf>. Accessed 7/8/10.

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